

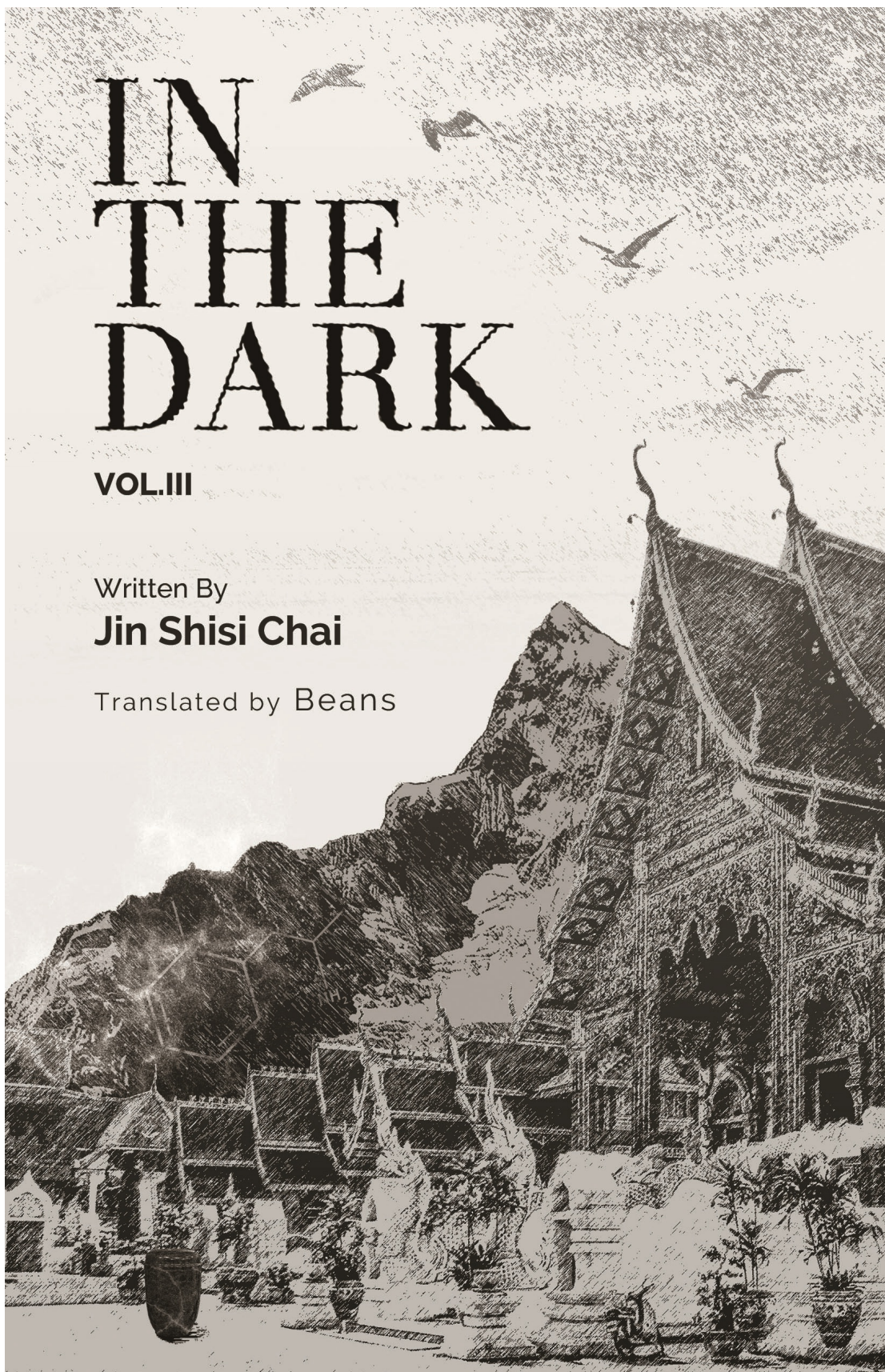
IN THE DARK

VOL.III

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In the Dark

Volume 3

Jin Shisi Chai



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Blue Fox

Since first going undercover, Xie Lanshan knew the Golden Triangle's area of operations not only hosted a large market for illegal drugs but also a major hot spot for human trafficking.

The area was one of the poorest and most underdeveloped areas within the Golden Triangle. Mu Kun was still at odds with Guan Nuoqin over territories and wealth, so the former had brought a dozen or so men to pay a personal visit around the area. The representative of the territory greeted the drug lord with fresh flower crowns and bouquets. Mu Kun laughed and tossed most of the flowers but saved the most beautiful red rose to give to Xie Lanshan.

The drug lord later walked inside to negotiate, leaving his subordinates outside the building to hang around. Beggars were everywhere. Some drug dealers used packs of cigarettes, candy, or new drugs to trade for a night of pleasure with the local women. Only Xie Lanshan handed the freshly budding rose to a girl and said in his accented Burmese:

"You're freer than you think you are."

These young women, who dressed shabbily, were hungry, and perhaps already addicted to drugs, laughed at the young man's gesture. Another drug dealer pulled out a pack of new product designed to look like candy that grabbed the women's attention, and the girls quickly stomped over the rose without hesitation.

"You're crazy. Why would you give a flower to a prostitute?" The midlevel boss under Mu Kun couldn't understand the gesture. He had just come back from sniffing meth with a local to see everyone else had already run out to party. Only Xie Lanshan was left sitting by the window. The small-time boss even tried to talk some sense into him and said, "The dirt-poor don't know shit about self-love or dignity. They don't even know what the word 'beautiful' means. They'll sleep with you if you give them a cigarette. Giving pearls to swine would be less wasteful than giving a flower to a prostitute. I swear I don't know what you're even thinking!"

Flowers were obviously worthless in a place plagued by drugs and poverty. No one had the energy to pay attention to the finer things in life, let alone know that they existed.

The humid and hot weather made sweat feel like wet glue on the skin. Xie Lanshan silently stared at the rough village outside the window.

"You really think you're Buddha or somebody special, here to spread love or some shit?" Perhaps due to the effects of the meth, the boss's eyes reddened as if they were

on fire as he glared at Xie Lanshan's profile. Then, as if enchanted by the young man's looks, the boss suddenly jumped on him like a madman.

"A-Lan... A-Lan, you really are beautiful..."

Before Xie Lanshan could push him off, Mu Kun walked into the room.

As the drug lord walked out of the business meeting, the scene he was met with upset him. He quickly drew his gun and fired a bullet right through the head of that small-time boss.

Mu Kun held a hand out toward Xie Lanshan to pull up the young man, whose face was now covered in fresh blood and bits of flesh.

The crew took a truck back to their base the next day. Neither Xie Lanshan nor Mu Kun sat in the car and instead stood at the edge of the truck bed, gazing at the village slowly vanishing into the horizon.

"I already suspected he was a spy from Guan Nuoqin." Mu Kun gritted his teeth as he mentioned the man he'd shot just the other day. Then he cursed Guan Nuoqin: "That piece of shit doesn't deserve to be called a drug lord. He's just a trafficker at most."

Xie Lanshan's expression remained blank and he didn't speak a word. Despair was a common emotion for those who spent long periods in hell, but his face was clear and only faintly wistful.

"Can you imagine how much poverty ruins a person? Guan Nuoqin used drugs to control these people. He sent the men off to become fishermen while the women were sold off for sex work. The most pitiful part is that these people don't have physical chains and shackles—they willingly let themselves be treated like cattle..."

The truck trudged forward, but Xie Lanshan's gaze suddenly lit up. He almost threw himself out of the truck and had to grab onto the handrail.

From afar, he saw two young women, one tall and one short, standing beside each other. The younger one carefully grasped a red rose in her hand, as if she held a treasure. They watched him leave and waved at him with bright grins.

A stream of warmth reached his heart; Xie Lanshan could feel his eyes burning. All doubts he had of his faith vanished with the wind. This was the only red rose in this forlorn and foreign land. Like a single spark of flame within the darkness, it filled this brutal mortal world with a touch of kindness.

His rough days in the Golden Triangle, his father who'd given his life in the field, his mother who'd gone mad, the proud and successful Liu Yanbo, the old and withered Tao Jun... Xie Lanshan woke from his nightmare and found himself in a hospital.

Tao Longyue sat beside his bed, surprise and joy written all over his suntanned face. Even the scar by his eyebrows glowed like a spark of lightning.

Xie Lanshan finally let out a sigh of relief after realizing he wasn't dead—it was a miracle he'd survived Mu Kun's hands. He lifted the thin sheet covering his body and checked himself only to be surprised to find all his limbs still attached.

Xie Lanshan sat up from the bed with a hand behind his head. He turned his stiff neck as he asked Tao Longyue, “What happened to me?”

“You’re asking me?” Captain Tao had rushed to the hospital early in the morning before eating breakfast and was presently inhaling a large baozi bun in his hand. He said, with food still in his mouth, “A rando saw you knocked out on the streetside and called an ambulance. What the hell happened? Did you get assaulted or was it that headache acting up again?”

Xie Lanshan leaned his head back and fell into deep thought, frowning. He’d been too busy investigating the serial murder a while back and hadn’t had time to report the clues he collected about Mu Kun to the higher-ups. Recalling that now, it seemed Mu Kun had been keeping an eye on him ever since they’d discovered Lang Li’s corpse carved with the letters “MK.”

Tao Longyue couldn’t tell what his buddy was thinking but remembered that food was always a good way to make people open their mouths. He offered, “Ya hungry? Should I buy some congee for you from the hospital’s cafeteria?”

Xie Lanshan turned to him and glanced at Tao Longyue suspiciously.

He couldn’t get Mu Kun’s words out of his head—that there was a traitor in the Flaming Triangle. The only options were either Tao Jun or Liu Yanbo. Out of personal bias, of course he suspected Liu Yanbo more, but what if it was Tao Jun? The man had gone through many ups and downs over the last decade. He’d broken his leg just before he was about to receive a promotion in the bureau, virtually ending his career in public security overnight. The culprit still hadn’t been caught, but the traffic police at the scene claimed the case was fishy because it was a preventable incident. After putting together all the old puzzle pieces, including what old Zhu Mingwu had told him earlier, Xie Lanshan grew even more unsure of everything. He couldn’t tell whether the decade-old fatherlike mentor he thought he had in Tao Jun was real or fake.

Tao Longyue noticed Xie Lanshan’s stare was cold and distant, then felt as if the gaze had gone past him to somewhere else further away. He couldn’t help but say, “A-Lan? Are you right in the head there, buddy?”

Perhaps the seeds of suspicion sprouted. Everyone looked like the Apostle to him right now. He suppressed the suspicion lingering in his heart and told himself, *This could be part of Mu Kun’s plot to create friction between us. He didn’t actually find out who the Apostle is and only said that to mess with us.*

With that thought, Xie Lanshan felt the pressure on his shoulders lighten. He softened his gaze and teased Tao Longyue, “I see you’re back to your dumb, smooth-brained self. I’m guessing you finally made up with Doctor Su?”

As expected, Tao Longyue scratched his head. His tanned face glowed red as he said in slight embarrassment, “We’re planning on signing the papers this month. We won’t do anything too fancy, maybe just invite some close friends and family for dinner.”

“I’m claiming best man—” Xie Lanshan stopped abruptly mid-joke, realizing that he needed to report to Sui Hong immediately now that Mu Kun was back. The news was too important and urgent to cover with just a quick phone call. He needed to pay a visit to the provincial branch.

“Huh? Where are you going?” Captain Tao was still floating in his little world of happiness. In contrast to the silly expression on his face, he noticed his best man looking grim as he was readying to leave the hospital.

“I need to go see the captain—take care of my hospital bill.”

As soon as he finished, he quickly left the room. Tao Longyue still didn’t quite follow as he chased behind Xie Lanshan and called, “Hey, I thought *I* was your captain?”

It only took about twenty minutes to drive from Hanhai City to the provincial branch. Chi Jin had already been assigned to work with the Hanhai branch on drug cases, so there wasn’t any reason for Xie Lanshan to personally pay the provincial office a visit, but he suddenly had the urge to do so.

It was around early afternoon; the sun was still bright. The golden public security logo shone under the light on the front gate of the office like a torch. Two ferocious stone lions rested by the front gate of the provincial office, flashing their fangs like two guardians that protected the justice of the land.

The scale of resources and capital available to the provincial branch was clear from a glance at its exterior; the building housing the investigation and technology unit and the command building stood proudly like twin towers that reached into the heavens. The offices inside were equally impressive, equipped with high-end computers, satellite connections, and comprehensive cybersecurity systems that protected the entire branch. The tall buildings were made from clean, sharp glass walls that refracted rainbows under the sunlight.

Xie Lanshan stood outside the gate, feeling a little anxious as he approached his old workplace. He stared at the stately logo above the gate. Who would have imagined that such a small emblem would represent countless heroic souls who fought for the safety of their people?

It was strange; he had only stepped into the provincial branch a handful of times with Sui Hong before going undercover, but he felt a sense of belonging and familiarity from every part of the building down to each brick and blade of grass. The provincial branch was like his second home. This place had honed his skills and shaped his soul.

The glare on the logo suddenly flashed from the reflecting sunlight, and Xie Lanshan closed his eyes instinctively. Like the logo, bits and pieces of his past flashed through his mind while his eyes were closed. He had left the place determined and without hesitation but only realized after retuning how many things had changed—including himself.

Just before Xie Lanshan arrived, Chi Jin had been reporting the latest findings of the Hanhai red-ice case to Sui Hong. Despite their joint work, neither the municipal nor the provincial branches had seen any significant breakthroughs in the major case. Even after successfully retrieving a massive amount of red ice from the Starex Group, they had yet to discover the mastermind behind it all. The special task unit in charge of the case had launched several thorough investigations based on their informants' intel, only for each lead to turn up a dead end.

Chi Jin believed that Mu Kun had installed a man in the Hanhai City bureau to leak information to the drug lord before the public security forces could act.

Sui Hong was about to speak when Xie Lanshan knocked on the door and walked into the meeting.

Aside from Chi Jin and Ling Yun, seven to eight other young men sat inside the room. The Blue Fox team was made of young men. All of them looked capable despite their age and handsome in their own ways even when dressed casually, but now in their sleek and fitted police uniforms, the group looked as if they could be a top boy band.

"You're here, A-Lan," Sui Hong greeted the young man as though Xie Lanshan were part of the team and introduced him to the rest of the group. "He's one of us. This is Xie Lanshan."

"Nice to meet you, buddy!" one of the current members said. This warm introduction was accompanied by equally enthusiastic responses from the rest of the team, aside from Chi Jin, whose expression remained grim.

Xie Lanshan cut the small talk and told Sui Hong that Mu Kun had come for him. He quickly listed out all the suspicious aspects of the last few major cases in Hanhai City from the initials found on Lang Li's corpse to the sudden appearance of red ice among high school girls. These issues, he concluded, were likely all connected to Mu Kun.

Sui Hong coughed a few times, and instead of commenting on Xie Lanshan's analysis, asked, "A-Lan, do you want to come back?"

This comment stunned Xie Lanshan for a good while before he realized that Sui Hong was asking if he wanted to return to the Blue Fox Commando. It was also a half-hearted joke, but it didn't change the fact that Xie Lanshan was indeed Sui Hong's best man when it came to facing Mu Kun.

Looking troubled, Sui Hong let out another small cough when Xie Lanshan didn't respond. He smiled at the young man and said, "What? Now that you're internet famous, are you too good for the drug enforcement unit?"

Sui Hong intended to provoke the young man, hoping that Xie Lanshan would rejoin them, yet before Xie Lanshan could respond, Chi Jin stepped in and said, "I object."

Sui Hong glanced at Chi Jin. His eyebrows furrowed as he said, "Please think before you speak."

Chi Jin didn't respond to his boss. Instead, he walked up to Xie Lanshan, then abruptly grabbed the other man's wrist. His eyes were sharp as he sneered, "He came to find you, but you came back unharmed?"

Xie Lanshan knew what Chi Jin was implying and paused slightly before confessing, "He left after knocking me out."

Chi Jin probed further and asked, "So, Mu Kun came looking for you just to talk about the good old days?"

Xie Lanshan didn't respond.

"Hah!" Chi Jin laughed. "Mu Kun sure is kind to you! Do you know how many of our people sacrificed their lives to capture him, the biggest drug lord in East Asia? So, why is he so kind only to you?"

Xie Lanshan still didn't speak, hoping to pull his hand from Chi Jin's grip, but the man only grabbed on tighter.

"Look at these clean, refined hands!" Chi Jin called out, drawing the attention of everyone in the room to Xie Lanshan's hands. His white and smooth skin was pristine and scarless. His hands looked slightly more fragile than an average man's and hardly like a drug enforcement officer's.

Chi Jin said, "Forget about your hands. Do you even have a single scar on your body? Why don't you tell us how a drug enforcement officer like you could survive six years undercover without a single injury?"

Xie Lanshan felt as if someone was choking him; he let out a breath of air before finally saying, "I don't need to explain myself to you."

Sui Hong knew the secret behind Xie Lanshan's scarless body but couldn't tell his teammate, especially not with Xie Lanshan here right now. He felt both guilt and torment. After two violent coughs, he interrupted the exchange coldly, "Chi Jin, that's enough."

Chi Jin still didn't give up and turned to Ling Yun beside him. "Ling Yun, roll up your pants!"

Ling Yun hesitated slightly, but after looking around, he rolled up one leg of his pants to expose a ghastly scar on his lower leg.

"Once, during an ambush, we held rank under a flooding storm for an entire night just to capture a drug dealer under Mu Kun! Ling Yun's leg had already been injured earlier during the operation, but the open wound was left to rot under the water, so he had to cut off muscles around the injury. We all put our lives on the line every single day, so after being undercover for six years, how do you explain coming out without even a scratch?"

Ling Yun quickly fixed his pants and saw the unease on their captain's face. He turned to say to Vice Captain Chi, "Chi Jin... that's enough..."

But Chi Jin's anger had already boiled over. Ling Yun couldn't convince him to stop, and Sui Hong's words hadn't reached him either. Before a whole room of Blue Fox members, he glared at Xie Lanshan and scolded the man, "If Mu Kun came for you, you should have pursued him like a wolf after prey and captured him, even if it meant risking your life! But you didn't—and that's because you're a traitor!"

Sui Hong's expression darkened as he walked up to Chi Jin.

Chi Jin lifted his head and said to Sui Hong, "Captain, I will be the first to reject letting him back—"

Before he could finish, Sui Hong lifted a hand and gave Chi Jin a heavy slap to the face.

Chi Jin wasn't the only one left speechless; even Xie Lanshan was taken aback for a moment. The bitterness inside him began spreading like moss; he opened his lips and gave Sui Hong a forced smile, saying, "Just because we work in public security doesn't mean we all have to carry the burden of an entire nation on our shoulders every day. I'm proud to protect a city, its people, or even just one person."

Unwilling to see his beloved team descend into more conflict because of him, Xie Lanshan turned and walked toward the door. His footsteps stopped just before he was a step away from leaving. Xie Lanshan turned around and stood straight, saluting to Sui Hong. His eyes began burning up as he said in a slightly hoarse voice, "But the Blue Fox will forever be my home, and you will always be my captain."

Xie Lanshan left without another word. He rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath to calm himself down.

When he was young and had first stepped into this building with Sui Hong, he'd dreamed about working here proudly one day. The pang of nostalgia prompted him to spend a little more time touring the provincial branch. The building had been constructed slightly before he was sent off undercover, but many places remained the same even years later.

He aimlessly wandered until he found himself in front of the old file room, which was secured by a fingerprint lock. There weren't any top-secret files kept here—in fact, Xie Lanshan had once pulled out information from the file room in the past. The old officer in charge of the database hadn't known the young man was about to go undercover and assumed he was here to stay, so he had recorded the young man's fingerprint into the lock. It was possible even Sui Hong hadn't known about this, and the old officer might have already retired.

Xie Lanshan pondered for a short time before placing his thumb on the lock in front of the room. As expected, but also strangely surprisingly, the door didn't open. As meticulous as Sui Hong had been with tampering Xie Lanshan's data, this was the only place that he'd missed.

While Xie Lanshan considered reasons for this and mulled over whether the locks could have been upgraded over the last few years, he suddenly heard a harsh call from behind. "Xie Lanshan, what are you doing here?"

He turned around and cursed his luck—it was Chi Jin.

The vice captain had just suffered a slap from his own boss earlier and was still boiling with rage. Seeing Xie Lanshan, he immediately vented his anger on the man and asked, “Why are you skulking around here, huh?”

Xie Lanshan didn’t want to get into another fight with him and readied to leave, only to discover Chi Jin blocking his way. Xie Lanshan didn’t speak, instead attempting to force his way through. Chi Jin quickly gave up on words as well and threw a punch.

Chi Jin had certainly acted on the spur of the moment, but he was confident he could control his punches. He hoped he could at least teach Xie Lanshan a lesson, so it surprised him when Xie Lanshan countered with an even more aggressive attack. Before his punch landed, Chi Jin felt his opponent grab his arm, twist it behind him, and then push him against the wall.

Chi Jin clenched his teeth in pain, attempting to struggle out of the vise grip, only to discover that Xie Lanshan wasn’t holding back at all and was pinning him down like a heavy rock.

Xie Lanshan pressed his whole body against the young man, then twisted Chi Jin’s arm a little more as if interrogating a suspect. He leaned forward and said in his ear, “I’ve had enough of you.”

“Ugh...” Vice Captain Chi refused to admit defeat. His body tensed and his teeth clenched as he tried to fight back in silence.

Xie Lanshan freed one of his own arms and grabbed the back of Chi Jin’s neck, then said in a hushed voice, “Don’t get on my nerves again, do you hear me?”

Chi Jin tried to lift his head despite the discomfort, but the moment he met Xie Lanshan’s eyes left him stunned.

The two men had only worked alongside each other for a brief period. He’d met Xie Lanshan two or three times while Xie Lanshan was undercover, and another few times after the man returned to the team. The Xie Lanshan he’d heard about from Sui Hong was kind, persevering, tolerant, and benevolent. Of course, Chi Jin couldn’t fathom it, nor had he planned on experiencing it firsthand; but from the brief exchanges they’d had in the past, he knew that Xie Lanshan really was resolute and could fight.

However, the Xie Lanshan before him now had the cold eyes of a madman. He could even feel something dangerous and horrifying about to awaken beneath that gaze.

“I said don’t get on my nerves again, got it?” Xie Lanshan didn’t loosen his hold as he repeated his question like he was waiting for a satisfying answer. His powerful grip pressed on Chi Jin’s neck, forcing the man to nod back.

Before other officers arrived to check on the commotion, Xie Lanshan let go of a shocked Chi Jin, fixed his jacket, and left the building.

(iii)

The serial killings ended with the death of Qiao Hui and his mother, but Shen Liufei still had suspicions about the case. He couldn't find the connection between Xia Hong and Qiao Hui. The first victim, Luo Xin, was Qiao Hui's neighbor, while the other two victims had medical records in Puren Hospital. Xia Hong and Qiao Hui's social circles did not overlap and their usual areas of activity were completely different. Xia Hong was killed the night Qiao Hui encountered Tao Longyue and it was unusual for Qiao Hui to assault a victim within such a short timeframe without a stalking period.

While Xie Lanshan was at the provincial branch, Shen Liufei requested Duan Licheng to pull up the surveillance footage in the Puren Hospital and confirmed Xia Hong had never set a foot in the facility. As the artist sat in front of a window in deep thought, the sunlight cast a shadow on half of his face.

Duan Licheng wasn't interested in the case; rather, his attention was focused on Shen Liufei's injury. The man asked, "Do you think it's a coincidence that someone attacked you?"

Shen Liufei glanced at his wound and then recalled the night at the bar. He shook his head and answered, "I think someone is after my life."

Duan Licheng kneeled slightly before Shen Liufei and asked, "Do you still want to find out the truth of what happened that year?"

Shen Liufei didn't respond, but his answer was clear: he had given up.

Duan Licheng's expression grew grave. "I risked everything to involve you in this experiment because of how long we've known each other. You told me you couldn't stand the fact that he was living free under a different identity—that you wanted him to face justice."

All related parties involved with that experiment had kept their mouths shut. No mass media had caught on to the truth, and only a few unreliable sources had barely scratched the surface in the vast space of the internet, making the events sound more like a baseless rumor. The ethical debate about brain transplant surgery in humans was still ongoing, but the experiment had been halted after the lead organizer was imprisoned for illegally conducting live human experiments.

As the second direct surgeon involved in the experiment, Duan Licheng knew just how complicated the internal business and political struggle was; he wouldn't have cut off all connections overseas and run back to China with such haste if that wasn't the case.

"I didn't tell you the truth about Ye Shen and Xie Lanshan for you to put your life in danger." Duan Licheng pressed a hand on Shen Liufei's shoulder and persuaded the artist out of deep sincerity, "Since you've given up on finding the truth and refuse to reveal Xie Lanshan's true identity, you should just come back to the States with me."

Shen Liufei looked up to glance at the doctor, then shook his head.

Duan Licheng was first shocked by the blunt refusal, then quickly sneered, “You’ve been blinded by this foolish fling. He isn’t a cop; he’s the culprit that murdered your whole family—a heinous criminal.”

“You’re right about some of it, but not everything.” Shen Liufei frowned slightly and finally, after a moment of silence, said, “Perhaps it’s the strange trust between a mother and son, but I always had a feeling that my mother is still alive.”

“The only person who knows the truth now is Ye Shen, but you won’t even tell him who he really is. How do you expect to investigate further?” Duan Licheng stared right into Shen Liufei’s eyes and said in a cold and chiding voice, “Or are you telling me a little bit of excitement in bed is more important than avenging your dead family?”

“Duan Licheng!” Shen Liufei grabbed the man’s collar as a harsh warning.

When Duan Licheng had first met Shen Liufei, the latter had just arrived in the States with his mentor. Their shared heritage while in a foreign land and the mere six-to seven-year age difference made the two quick friends. In Duan Licheng’s eyes, Shen Liufei was a cold and stubborn man. His coldness allowed him to remain still in his own corner even when the world was in chaos as he observed it through a neutral and distant lens. Yet, when the artist was stubborn, he could easily fight back like an immovable warrior.

The two men wordlessly confronted each other until a phone call interrupted the stalemate. Shen Liufei picked up the call from Xie Lanshan; the cop was back from his trip to the provincial bureau.

Shen Liufei let out a heavy sigh as soon as he hung up, then stood and walked away.

Duan Licheng knew he couldn’t stop the man and didn’t bother calling Shen Liufei back. He only stared at the man’s back and said with determination, “I promise I *will* bring you back.”

They met at a small park within the city. There was an artificial lake with clear water and plenty of fish, which made it a popular location for the elderly to while away their time casting out a line.

It was a cloudy day with a chill breeze that brushed the surface of the water. The sharp cold kept people away from the lakeside as they sought warmth.

Xie Lanshan sat on a large rock beside the lake and stared at the reflection of a man’s face on the water, oblivious to the person walking toward him from behind.

The face in the reflection was both familiar and foreign; he squinted and carefully studied every detail. He numbly pulled the corner of his lips up and saw the man in the reflection give him a smile, but his gaze was still cold and chilling.

Xie Lanshan turned to look at his own hands. His face was intensely handsome, but his hands carried a contrasting elegance. The fingers were slender and long, the skin

white like a lotus blossom—just as Chi Jin had said, they certainly didn't look like the hands of an officer. Remembering the data room he couldn't open with his fingerprint, he suddenly recalled another memory from the past.

It was difficult to earn the trust of the drug dealers in the early days of his undercover mission. He would sometimes be forced to take drugs to prove himself and had no choice but to tamper with the aluminum sheets to pretend he had really done so. Then, he would fake being stoned and get into brawls. Once he had even ended up with a knife wound along his arm, and he'd strained a leg just to earn their trust.

Xie Lanshan finally realized the horrific changes happening to his body—not that he hadn't thought about the possibility in the past, but before it had sounded like fantasy. Perhaps out of some internal self-defense mechanism, he had subconsciously convinced himself that it was impossible for something like this to happen.

He remembered that novel—Higashino Keigo's *Henshin*.

Connecting the dots around the brain surgery he had no memory of, the many recent incidents when he'd felt a loss of control, the strange victims that kept flitting into his memories, and the "Ye Shen" Zhuo Tian had begged to, he had no choice but to consider the possibility that perhaps his own body no longer belonged to himself.

By the time Shen Liufei approached him, Xie Lanshan was holding himself up against the rock, leaning his upper body toward the surface of the lake with his eyebrows furrowed. He stared deeply at the reflection as the chilly winds around him readied to pierce him and push him down into the lake.

It wasn't until Xie Lanshan felt a pair of hands almost reach his shoulders that he realized someone was behind him. He turned his head abruptly.

Those hands grabbed his shoulders tightly and pulled him back to safety on land.

Xie Lanshan realized the person who had pulled him back from the brink was Shen Liufei. Joy surfaced on his face as he quietly embraced the man beneath the gentle sunset.

"Hey, cuz," Xie Lanshan teased. Shen Liufei didn't respond, and instead pulled Xie Lanshan tighter into his embrace. Both men had been mentally exhausted and only found some solace and strength through the warmth of each other.

Shen Liufei finally let go after a long while, then cupped Xie Lanshan's face with his hands. He pressed his forehead against Xie Lanshan's and said at the close distance, "What were you thinking about?"

Xie Lanshan couldn't talk about the secret of his body. It was too ridiculous. He playfully bopped the tip of his nose against Shen Liufei's and squeezed out a smile, asking the artist, "What about you? Where were you at earlier?"

The setting sun glowed on the gentle and weary man's face. Shen Liufei tried to cover his fatigue and said, "I discovered some additional suspicious points about Xia Hong's case. I just came back from Puren Hospital and was planning to visit her house."

“Take the car, I’ll go with you.” Xie Lanshan lifted an eyebrow lazily, then suddenly widened his eyes. That same terrible feeling of being watched by predatory eyes once again overwhelmed him. He turned to Shen Liufei and said, “Do you feel as if someone’s following us?”

“So you’ve noticed too.” Shen Liufei also scanned their surroundings; people still were walking in the park at this hour. The weather was good and the sun was still out. They searched for the source of the feeling, then noticed a shadow flash from behind the little hill near the back of the park. Upon closer inspection, however, it seemed to just be the shadows from the swaying tree branches.

Xie Lanshan froze on the spot, his expression still cautious, as if an enemy would show up at any moment. Shen Liufei tapped him on the shoulder and said, “Let’s go.”

The two men first paid a visit to Xia Hong’s residence. Her house was the clean and modest standard two-room layout of a single woman. While Xie Lanshan wasn’t as sensitive to color as Shen Liufei, he noticed something was off at first glance. His first impression was that the space looked cold and dark, but he couldn’t place his finger on where exactly this strange feeling came from.

Shen Liufei reminded him, “There’s no red.”

Xie Lanshan immediately recalled, “There was a conversation on Xia Hong’s cell phone between her and a seller on Taobao. She didn’t get the color of the product she requested—it was red instead of purple. She threw a fit and refused to accept an apology or compensation.”

Xia Hong was quite superstitious, and aside from complaints and other miscellaneous feng-shui related messages on her phone, they found no useful evidence. After a closer inspection, they discovered there really was no trace of red in the house.

Then, following the schedule on Xia Hong’s phone, they drove off to another place.

This time they came to a traditional Chinese chiropractor clinic. A large sign reading “Fortunes” hung above the building. An old blind man wearing sunglasses was doing readings for people on the side of the street. He had few clients of his own, but the man seemed to enjoy his time; he would mumble to himself and sometimes even sing by the streetside.

Despite his unseeing eyes, the man had an eye for business. He’d hired a few students to do chiropractic medicine on one side and a few more to sell feng-shui artifacts. Of course, the old man also had some enthusiastic fans with enough money to buy out the whole city. They often paid hundreds or thousands to hire him to perform sacred feng-shui rituals.

Xie Lanshan walked up to the old blind man, spread his arms out, and pressed intimidatingly on the old man’s little table. He called out half-jokingly, “Master.”

The blind man didn’t answer and instead stretched out his old and withered hand, then tapped on his table. He quickly pulled all the copper coins, bamboo sticks, and

other fortune-telling tools back into his arms.

Xie Lanshan's gaze turned cold as he asked, "What are you doing?"

"Closing up. Nothing good happens when the police arrive." The old man waved him off in a haste, as if he didn't even want to consider giving the cop before him a reading. He reached down and attempted to search for his cane as he said, "Cops are bad omens—almost as bad as the evil spirits and reapers behind your back."

Xie Lanshan hadn't even pulled out his police badge, but the old man knew who he was with just one line. He wasn't sure if the old man really had talent or if it was just a lucky guess.

"I'm not here for you personally and I know you're not actually blind. No need to fake it." Xie Lanshan kicked out a stool from beneath the table, stood to the side, and offered Shen Liufei the seat.

"I'm not a cop, I certainly won't be cursed by those evil spirits of yours," Shen Liufei said calmly. "There's a female customer who frequents your place. Her name is Xia Hong. Do you happen to remember her?"

The old man slammed on the table and nodded, saying he remembered her. The young woman was very generous with her money and had been hoping to marry her recently divorced rich boss.

Her boss—Liu Mingfang? Shen Liufei lightly pressed his eyebrows and asked, "What did you tell her?"

"Her Chinese zodiac is a tiger bound within a cage. Her name 'Hong' is also a homophone for red. On top of that, this is the year of fire—doubling the fire upsets the balance of the five elements, which is a bad omen..." The old blind man continued on, but the gist was that red was the color Xia Hong needed to avoid this year.

Xie Lanshan didn't believe in fortune-telling gambits but understood an important fact from the explanation: someone as superstitious as Xia Hong would never walk onto the streets in a red dress and become a target of Qiao Hui's crimes.

Shen Liufei thanked the man and was about to leave when he was called back. "We often say that, just as how people have no place of belonging without a home, fate has no meaning without a guide. Most people only have one astrological house and path of fate, but you have two. Life is unpredictable and ever-changing—are you sure you don't want a reading?"

Self-proclaimed psychics and mystic masters had their way of prying into people's hearts, and Xie Lanshan felt these words aimed right at his own troubles, but his response was quick and harsh, "You'll even lie to a cop, huh? If you're not careful, I'll take you back to the station."

"I said I don't do readings for cops. I wasn't talking to you." The old man lifted his old eyes behind the sunglasses and turned to Shen Liufei. "Your double-path fate is very unusual. Look, even the birds on the trees don't dare to chirp with you around."

A vibrant and beautiful bird was resting on a tree branch. The bird had built its nest right under the roof of the chiropractic clinic, so it watched over the students day and

night as they practiced their trade and the occult. Over the years, the animal seemed to have earned itself some spiritual powers and believed itself to be a phoenix. It often sang and posed proudly under the sun. The old man had complained that the bird was too noisy and had his students attempt to shoo it away multiple times to no avail, but the bird quieted the moment the cop and his friend arrived.

The old man lifted a hand and twirled his finger. The bird sang a short refrain before flying off.

The two men paid little attention to the old man's last words before they left and focused their attention on Xia Hong's case.

Xie Lanshan said, "Is it possible that someone took advantage of the news while the serial-killer case was still trending? They took advantage of the opportunity to kill Xia Hong, skin her, and sew her mouth shut to pretend that her murder was part of the case?"

Shen Liufei nodded slightly and said, "Even though Xia Hong's body was dealt with very professionally and almost believably, we only exposed the key 'red dress' detail after Xia Hong's death. The culprit didn't expect this despite having a very thorough plan."

Xie Lanshan followed up immediately, "Liu Mingfang left a witness account at the bureau right after Xia Hong's death, but he didn't mention anything about the relationship he had with her."

Shen Liufei turned to him and asked, "Are you sure you're not letting your bias affect your judgment?"

The rough relationship between Xie Lanshan and Liu Mingfang had lasted two whole generations, and many differences often set them apart. Xie Lanshan pondered this question seriously before confidently responding, "I have no bias. I won't say he's the culprit, but he has to be hiding something."

(iv)

It wasn't until long after Xie Lanshan had left and the sun had set below the horizon that Chi Jin finally dared to step into Sui Hong's office. Ling Yun and the rest of the team had already left; his captain sat alone in front of the desk looking gloomy and silent. Chi Jin refrained from interrupting his captain and merely stood in silence, reminiscing about the first time they'd met over a decade ago.

The two men's first meeting was a dramatic tale. Chi Jin was around twelve or thirteen that year when he was home alone. The unit below his house had suddenly caught on fire, which quickly spread up to his house. His grandmother had locked the doors and windows when she left, leaving the poor child trapped inside the house. At that moment, a young cop broke in and picked him up, then rushed out the door. The newspaper that night dedicated a tiny section on this incident titled: "Drug Enforcement Officer Passes by Fire, Becomes Firefighting Hero Overnight." That

young officer from the story was the newly enlisted Sui Hong.

The hero came and went as silently as the wind. Chi Jin didn't have time to thank Sui Hong, as he was almost coughing out a lung after he was saved—but in that moment, he decided that he, too, would become a cop when he grew up.

Sui Hong had fought against drug dealers on the front lines for over ten years, yet despite not smoking or drinking, the man had a chronic cough. It wasn't anything serious, but it had no cure. That was why Chi Jin always kept a bottle of Nin Jiom Cough Syrup since joining the Blue Fox. It was a special type of cough syrup he'd spent a long time tracking down that was said to be great for treating the throat.

His captain often lost track of time when busy. Chi Jin assumed it was about time that his captain finished the last bottle and offered a new one to his boss.

He walked toward Sui Hong and called out gently, "Captain."

"You're here?" Sui Hong turned to look at him and smiled, then coughed a bit before saying, "I thought you were still mad at me. Did it hurt?"

Chi Jin shook his head, then met his captain's gaze. The brightness and look behind those eyes looked much more familiar now. The glow of the sunset danced like droplets of water on his face. His eyes were wistful—they would only look so melancholic whenever there was a mention of Xie Lanshan. Like a stream of fresh water flowing into the depths of the mountain, the man's eyes were both curious and majestic but also pitiful to look at.

This thought soured his heart; he wasn't upset at the earlier slap in the face. He simply couldn't fathom why his captain would always sing praises for Xie Lanshan while looking so wistful.

Chi Jin clenched the Nin Jiom Cough Syrup bottle in his hands and gave Sui Hong another glance, then said, after suppressing the sourness inside him, "Mu Kun let Xie Lanshan free more than once already, I doubt it's as simple as what he had claimed."

The temperature inside the room dropped. Chi Jin noticed his captain's expression darkened, as if "Xie Lanshan" was taboo to mention to the older man.

Sui Hong shook his head and said sternly, "I know what you're trying to say, but Xie Lanshan would never be a traitor. How do you want me to prove to you that he's a good cop?"

Chi Jin still believed his suspicion of the man was reasonable and fought back. "You punish Ling Yun and me harshly for every little mistake, so why are you lenient toward Xie Lanshan? You think he isn't a troublemaker?"

Sui Hong closed his eyes, his eyelashes flickered slightly as he said, "You don't understand..."

"I really don't... so can you please explain it to me so that I do? You know that... you..." Chi Jin didn't dare to finish the sentence. He clenched his hand into a fist and gripped the bottle in his hand tightly, feeling his eyes burn up.

Sui Hong let out a small cough and waved a hand, coldly interrupting the young man, "You can put the bottle on my desk and leave."

“Captain...”

“I’m asking you to leave.”

Chi Jin looked hurt; his eyes were wide as if he was a wounded dog. He waited for a few minutes in silence without another word from his captain, then carefully placed the warmed cough syrup bottle before Sui Hong and walked out the door without another word.

Even the most cunning drug dealer could not escape the sharp eyes of Sui Hong. He knew very well what his vice captain was thinking.

Ever since the day he’d saved Chi Jin from the fire and found out the child was an orphan living with his grandmother, Sui Hong had kept in contact out of concern. He would pay the young boy visits during holidays, buy him groceries, and chat with him.

He wasn’t exactly sure when he first noticed the way the young boy looked at him had changed. The gaze was burning with passion; Sui Hong knew what was behind that look, but he didn’t respond. He watched coldly as that yearning grew stronger over the years, as the suppression of that love with nowhere to go clouded the young man’s eyes.

It wasn’t that Sui Hong was oblivious. He merely refused to overstep the professional boundaries between himself and his subordinates. His friendship with Xie Lanshan had already led him astray to do something he still wasn’t sure was justified—and something even more powerful such as love? Sui Hong couldn’t imagine it. At least maintaining a safe boundary with little commitment would make any inevitable farewells a little more bearable. He was and would forever feel a lifetime of guilt for Xie Lanshan, whether to the one who gave his life in a foreign land or to the one who now lived in a different body.

The sky darkened after sunset. A few gray clouds still decorated the sky like imprints on a backdrop, and Sui Hong was still wallowing in guilt when his phone rang.

“Haven’t contacted you in a long time, Captain Sui.”

The voice on the other end was a deep and unique man’s voice that immediately signaled Sui Hong to the other man’s identity. Because of the classified surgery, he was acquainted with Duan Licheng.

Two weeks had passed since the serial-killer case. Qiao Hui and his mother were both dead. The bureau had also publicly announced that the case was closed, which made the ordeal a headache for Vice Chief Liu when he heard the violent crimes unit had requested the reopening of the case.

The media and public all had their eyes on them; any wrong move could mean risking his career as the vice chief.

Liu Yanbo didn’t respond as to whether he would reopen the case and returned home with a grave expression. He turned to his son and asked immediately upon his

return, “Did you have anything to do with your secretary’s death?”

Liu Mingfang could feel cold sweat rolling down his back as soon as his father questioned him, and he quickly responded, “You mean Xia Hong? We’re just colleagues, that’s all. Wasn’t her case closed already?”

Liu Yanbo still trusted his son. The young man might not be particularly intelligent, but he wasn’t someone who would cause such great harm to others. After some thought, the old chief said, “Xie Lanshan wanted to reopen Xia Hong’s case. He said that the real murderer may be a copycat. This could possibly mean that the person behind her death was someone close to her.”

Liu Mingfang nodded in agreement to hide the guilt inside him and said, “I don’t understand much about how these investigations work, so what’re your thoughts on it?”

Liu Yanbo sighed at the difficult situation and said, “Xie Lanshan does have a point. I have no choice but to approve the reopening.”

After the old man returned to his study following dinner, Liu Mingfang quickly gave Tang Qinglan a call and explained the situation, then asked what he should do.

“You’re asking me? I’m not the one that killed her. I don’t even know your secretary.” Tang Qinglan laughed playfully on the other side of the line as if she couldn’t care less and asked, “Your dad’s the chief of the bureau. Can’t he handle it?”

Liu Mingfang was on the edge of a breakdown when he realized how he could no longer escape the situation and said, “But I didn’t kill her either. Look, I know I joined hands with you guys out of my own stupidity, but you can’t just leave me in the dust.”

Miss T showed no sympathy and said, “What are you scared of? Even if they find out it wasn’t done by the actual serial killer, there’s no guarantee that they’ll suspect you.”

Liu Mingfang felt he was dancing on fire and didn’t feel comforted at all, then said, “Xie Lanshan’s the one who requested the reopening. You know he’s got beef with me, and even aside from that, he’s good at this whole catching criminals thing; there aren’t any cases he can’t solve!”

“Ah, him.” Miss T’s voice audibly rose as her interest was piqued. “If Xie Lanshan’s after you, might as well shoot him first then, right?”

Liu Mingfang was puzzled. “What do you mean?”

Tang Qinglan pondered for a bit before saying, “Didn’t you say your ex-wife suddenly got into a fight with Xie Lanshan? As I remember, she even wrote that mental health assessment about him having violent tendencies and needing to be removed from his current post.”

Liu Mingfang had temporarily let go of his plans to recover their marriage when he saw Song Qilian return to the embrace of her first love, but now he recalled how unusual his ex-wife’s behavior had been. He asked, “So what should I do now?”

“You fool, shouldn’t you know already?” Tang Qinglan was annoyed with him. “Go dig up some dirt on him and then shove it in your dad’s face. You’ll be safe if he really gets transferred to a different unit.”

Liu Mingfang finally understood and nodded in agreement. He decided that even if he couldn’t find any real dirt, he would fabricate a story if he had to.

“I can help you this time.” Tang Qinglan chuckled once again. “But you will need to do something for me too.”

“I’ve helped you enough. I even installed that fake app for you to listen in to my dad’s conversations on his phone.” Unsure what the woman wanted, Liu Mingfang grew even more anxious. “You guys have managed to escape a few times from the Blue Foxes, but remember they’re all elites. You guys can’t run from them forever.”

“That’s why I need you to help me,” Tang Qinglan said. After a few seconds of pause, she sneered coldly. “I need you to find a way to get a Blue Fox member on our side.”

(v)

After getting inspiration from Tang Qinglan, Liu Mingfang decided he was going to dig up the truth behind Xie Lanshan’s report. Something serious must have been behind it to have had such an effect on Song Qilian. Of course, Song Qilian would never respond if he were to ask her directly, so he decided his son would be a better way to get his foot in the door.

Liu Chang had quite a good relationship with his dad, even after his parents’ divorce. The father and child sat together in a small park. Liu Chang sat quietly, a burger in one hand and a toy airplane in the other.

The little boy had a striking resemblance to his dad, which earned some kind glances from pedestrians who passed by the father-and-son duo. Liu Mingfang felt proud and refreshed. He even offered to buy new toys for his son to play with him. Liu Chang munched on the burger while fiddling with the airplane, occasionally making little gleeful engine sounds with his mouth.

After satisfying his role as the kind father, Liu Mingfang quietly asked his son, “So why was your mom having a fight with your Uncle Xie earlier?”

Liu Chang might be small, but he certainly had a sharp mind. He quickly shook his head and said he had no idea.

Liu Mingfang noticed his son wasn’t telling the truth and gently knocked the boy on the head. “What happened? Got so used to hanging out with your uncle that you won’t even talk to your own dad now?”

Liu Chang lifted his round little face and stared at his own father with judgment and distrust.

If it was any other day, Liu Mingfang would have given this little rascal a smack already. However, he had a request to make and had to keep his cool; the older man

smiled back and said, “Don’t you want Daddy to get back with Mom? When we get back together, I’ll buy you burgers every day, and your favorite toys!”

Liu Chang weighed the value of his airplane toy, lowered his head, and thought about it briefly before concluding he still wanted to stay on his mother’s side. He said, “If you promise to not hit her again, then I’ll tell you.”

Liu Mingfang promised the boy, “How could I? I didn’t do it on purpose before either. Sometimes I’d get a little tipsy from work and couldn’t control my temper. How about this? You can hit me if there’s a next time.”

The child couldn’t betray his own father for Uncle Xie. Liu Chang dug through his memories and said, “Mom wouldn’t let me go out with Uncle Xie and told me that I have to stay away from him. When I asked her why, she just cried and didn’t say anything.”

“And?” Liu Mingfang pestered.

“And...” the little boy said as he slyly reached out a hand. “You give me fifty yuan, then I’ll tell you everything.”

“You money-loving little rascal, at least this proves you still take something from me.” Liu Mingfang pulled out his wallet and handed his son a hundred-yuan bill then said, “Here’s double. Don’t try haggling with me again.”

“Yay!” Liu Chang exclaimed in joy as he held the bill up in front of the sun to check if it was real. After confirming the authenticity of the bill, he gestured for his old man to come closer.

Liu Mingfang leaned in toward his son.

Liu Chang whispered, “Mom cried for a long time that night, super loud. I saw she was writing something and heard it was supposed to go to Uncle Xie’s boss in the provincial branch.”

The provincial branch? Liu Mingfang was puzzled; Xie Lanshan was no longer a member of the Blue Foxes—he was a cop in Hanhai City’s violent crimes unit. Just what could he have possibly done to warrant a serious enough condemnation be brought to the provincial branch’s attention?

Liu Chang continued, “She wrapped the stuff up to mail out the next day and brought it to her office. I don’t know if she ended up sending it in the end though.”

“What kind of paperwork was it?”

“A yellow envelope, about this big, and it was thick.” Liu Chang gestured.

Liu Mingfang never heard anything about Xie Lanshan being investigated by the provincial branch from his father and assumed that this package was never sent out, then he smiled knowingly. He gave his son a pat on the head and said, “You might be on to something big this time. Quick, finish your burger and Dad will send you home. I need to go pay your mom a visit later.”

He drove straight to Song Qilian’s office after dropping his son off, put on his customer service smile, and greeted the nurses courteously. The people in the hospital all recognized him as Doctor Song’s ex-husband, so they easily let him pass through

without trouble. Liu Mingfang knew that Song Qilian would be out that day to report to the municipal bureau and wouldn't return so soon, so he locked the door to her office as soon as he walked in. With his limited understanding of his ex-wife, he began searching through all possible places where that package might have been kept.

Song Qilian kept the keys to the locked drawer inside her pen holder. After having no luck elsewhere, Liu Mingfang opened the drawer to continue his search.

As expected, he found that yellow envelope beneath heavy files at the bottom of the drawer.

He took it out and noticed the recipient's name: Peng Huaili, the director of the public security provincial branch. He was the mentor of the famous Flaming Triangle as a younger man and was also an old acquaintance and boss of Liu Yanbo.

Liu Mingfang opened the envelope and saw Xie Lanshan's name on the file. After confirming he'd found the right item, he heard someone walk toward the office. He quickly closed the drawer and relocked it.

Before Song Qilian returned, he held the envelope carefully in his arms and quietly left her office.

After Mu Kun's reappearance, Chi Jin and his team briefly returned to the provincial branch and received a new mission before going to Hanhai.

The young man requested a day off the same day he returned to the city. He left Ling Yun and, still carrying frustration in his chest, walked into a bar often frequented by drug dealers, hoping to catch some clues, only to find himself downing glass after glass.

Some say that alcohol is the solution to depression, and Chi Jin only now realized that ancient wisdom never lied. Literature also often simultaneously described liquor as a poison that pierced the stomach and a magical potion to forget all despair. Chi Jin didn't feel the effects of the latter, but the burning sensation of the alcohol did give him some relief.

Only his heart remained in pain.

Alcohol also exposed all of those hidden emotions he never dared to express normally. He had survived deadly battles through raging tides, hoping to protect his homeland even if it meant giving his life on foreign land. He'd prepared himself for the worst, only to discover he was living through it, as the one he loved never spared him a glance.

After drinking too much, a pretty young woman was giving kisses to everyone she could lay her hands on. As her gaze shifted to see a young and handsome man sitting at the bar alone, she rushed over like a butterfly that had discovered a sweet flower.

She pressed herself against him and said, "Hey, handsome, wanna spend some time together?"

Chi Jin was taken aback slightly before disgust surfaced on his face. He growled, "Leave."

Before the first young woman could leave, another one slid over and said, “Don’t be so mean, handsome, let’s all have a good time.”

The intimate contact and heavy scent of perfume gave Chi Jin a headache. Finding it unbearable, he slammed the glass in his hand on the table. The glass shattered immediately, splashing golden liquor everywhere as glass shards cut through the palm of his hand.

“Why are you being so nasty?! Your beer got all over me. Do you know how expensive this outfit is?”

“All right, all right, how expensive could it be? Just wipe it off.” Liu Mingfang appeared and quickly held back the girl, who was about to throw a fit. He pulled out a handful of cash from his wallet and shoved it in her hands, then said with a grin, “How about wiping it with these?”

Liu Mingfang was a busy bee today; almost as soon as he left Song Qilian’s office, he had to make his way to the bar to meet with a client. Though the place was crowded and dimly lit, he recognized Chi Jin even in the chaotic scene. He recalled Miss T’s words, quickly bid his client farewell, and walked toward Chi Jin, finding an opportunity to help the young man out of a difficult situation.

Using his influence in the bureau, Liu Yanbo had often invited members of the Blue Fox out for dinner, so Chi Jin had seen Liu Mingfang before and knew the young man was Vice Chief Liu’s son. He yielded slightly and gave a glance of approval for Liu Mingfang to sit down.

Liu Mingfang poured a new glass of wine for him and said, “I heard Xie Lanshan returned to the provincial branch a few days ago.”

“Don’t mention that name around me.” Chi Jin felt tipsy already, but downed the liquor in the glass.

Ever since receiving the request from Miss T to win over someone in the Blue Fox, Liu Mingfang had been actively asking his father about them, so he knew that Chi Jin had always been at odds with Xie Lanshan.

He smiled and didn’t mention the name again, instead offering more liquor to the young man after letting go of all doubts he had earlier about this job. Desire is a weakness; these elite members of the Blue Fox were human like everyone else—they had their weak spots. He then thought about how cunning Miss T was and her skills in manipulating people; it wouldn’t be hard to lure this cop to their side if she could handle him.

The quiet but calculated drinking session ended quite satisfactorily. Liu Mingfang escorted Chi Jin back to the officer’s home and let his roommate—who was Ling Yun—take care of the drunk cop, then took a cab back to his own house. Reality and fantasy seemed to blend before his eyes. Liu Mingfang wanted nothing more than to collapse right onto his bed when he suddenly remembered that yellow envelope. He stood up and took a peek at it.

This little glimpse woke him up completely. His mouth hung wide open, and his eyeballs were ready to pop out of their sockets.

It was too unreal, too absurd to be true, but connecting it to Xie Lanshan's changes, everything seemed to make too much sense. After feeling extreme shock and disbelief, he laughed out loud. He had the cat by its tail. What else could he be afraid of now?

Liu Mingfang stayed up the whole night studying this file. He resealed it after a careful reading, called up a courier service, and delivered this to Sui Hong's boss, Director Peng, smiling as he waited for the violent storm to strike.

Gone Missing

Two more events occurred in the Handong Province during the days right before New Year's Day.

First, Wen Jue, one of the country's most popular members of a new boy idol group, went missing. The news exploded on social media. Wen Jue was a fortunate man who'd made a name for himself in the entertainment industry despite not having talent in singing or dancing; he was quite childish as well, but because of his good looks, he gained popularity overnight through a talent scouting show at the age of twenty-two and became the next hot celebrity of his generation. Wen Jue's manager was Han Guangming, a smooth-talking and dramatic man who had a knack for business. He clung to Wen Jue as a source of income and worked day and night to keep his talent the trending topic on social media every day.

The difference between a celebrity and the average citizen is their attitude—most celebrities nowadays don't take things too seriously. For example, while most people would worry about rushing into the hospital if they were injured during work, celebrities would prioritize making a post on their social media account for fear that they would miss the opportunity to be the first to announce it. So, when Han Guangming first learned that Wen Jue had gone missing, the first thing he did wasn't to call the cops. Instead, he busily wrote up articles and posts on his social media account to spread rumors.

It wasn't until three days later, when he still saw no sign of Wen Jue, that Han Guangming realized it wasn't a joke this time and contacted the police.

Wen Jue went missing while he was filming a reality show in a small town near the border of Myanmar. After contacting the local police to pull up the surveillance from the hotel, the police concluded he was kidnapped. Further investigation revealed that the person who'd kidnapped Wen Jue was a subordinate of the drug lord Guan Nuoqin from Thailand. As the kidnappers hadn't called in to blackmail anyone, they likely didn't know who Wen Jue was and simply wanted to traffic the young man in the black market. The provincial bureau immediately proposed to rescue their citizen on foreign soil and were ready to carry out the mission with the help of the Thai police department.

The second incident was less exciting than the disappearance of the dream boyfriend of many young women: Captain Sui Hong from the Blue Fox took a long vacation.

Some said that Sui Hong's long-time battle on the front lines against drug dealers had taken a toll—that the man was already at his limit and needed to take a long and curative rest.

Others said Director Peng excused Captain Sui after a fiery argument; supposedly the dispute was kept a secret and the rumor about Sui Hong's declining health was merely a cover-up.

The rumors didn't come out of nowhere, and even Xie Lanshan felt something was fishy. The province was now plagued with the newest drug on the market—red ice. Xie Lanshan knew his boss. As the sharpest knife in the drug enforcement team, Captain Sui was a man who would fight until his last breath. How could a man like that possibly take a vacation during such turbulent times?

It was the weekend, but Xie Lanshan had to attend a community event that was jointly sponsored by the public security department and the city. The serial-killer case left some in the city worried. In order to actively prevent more young women from becoming victims of sexual assault, the city had proposed a partnership with the municipal bureau to host special classes on self-defense at local universities and high schools.

Many young men in the bureau would not turn down an opportunity to be surrounded by college girls, so Liu Yanbo purposely appointed the least enthusiastic one—who happened to be Xie Lanshan—to take on the job. Of course, Xie Lanshan couldn't help but guess that Chief Liu was using this as an excuse to distract him from investigating Xia Hong's case.

The case hadn't been assigned to Tao Longyue's team, and the other teams weren't particularly interested in reopening the case either. As Xie Lanshan watched the case quickly grow cold and join the other unsolved cases in the bureau, he felt even more strongly that Liu Yanbo was the one who was holding everything up on purpose. This further deepened his suspicion that the old man was the real Apostle. The weight in his chest grew heavier by the day, and he grew ready to expose it at any moment.

Right before heading off to the school, Xie Lanshan and Shen Liufei returned to the artist's old residence. The unit was still empty, so the two checked their mailbox first.

In an age where the World Wide Web connects the globe, reaching places faster than an airplane and with greater reach than a train track, traditional mail was a rare sight. As expected, the mailbox was filled with nothing but advertisements.

Xie Lanshan watched Shen Liufei stare dumbly at a pile of junk mail and asked, "Are you waiting for a letter?"

Shen Liufei nodded, looking slightly dark, and said, "From Tang Xiaomo."

Xie Lanshan remembered this strange little girl and knew that she'd left to travel because of her grandfather's case. She would always send a postcard to Shen Liufei whenever she reached a new stop.

The three had developed quite a good relationship even before her grandfather's case was settled. Xie Lanshan responded sourly, "How come this li'l shit only ever contacts you and not me? I don't even get a text, let alone a whole postcard."

Shen Liufei's eyebrows pressed together more as he said, "Perhaps it's just my worrisome nature, but I have a feeling that something happened to her."

Xie Lanshan was shocked and asked, "Why's that?"

"She once mentioned to me that she thinks a man has been following her in the shadows." Shen Liufei explained that the last postcard he'd received from Tang Xiaomo was a month ago from Bangkok, Thailand. The postcard explained how she was going to kiss a drag queen and then head over to Dubai to check out gold, but that was the last the man had heard from her.

Of course, the young girl could have possibly forgotten to send a postcard while she was out trotting the globe, but even the Weibo account that she updated daily had also gone quiet for a few days.

Her last post was a selfie. In it, the young girl grinned brilliantly and posed with a V sign in front of a background that seemed to be in Bangkok.

A few days of sun added heat to the already moist weather, making the air feel as though it were clinging on their skin.

After they finished checking the mail, Shen Liufei drove Xie Lanshan to the school.

A warm breeze blew past the men after they stepped out of the car. Xie Lanshan looked up at the sky; his temples would throb painfully whenever the weather was about to change, making him feel quite unsettled.

"Drive safe, cuz." This nickname had transformed into a pet name between the lovers over time, and it was short and simple even in bed. After giving the petulant and thick clouds in the sky another glance, Xie Lanshan said, "Look at this weather. It's growing heavy like the sky's ready to collapse."

Xie Lanshan stepped into the multimedia conference room of Normal University five minutes before the time of their scheduled session only to discover the door was locked shut.

He waited patiently for about twenty minutes until an instructor walked over and told him the event was canceled. They had thought the bureau would have notified Xie Lanshan already and didn't expect to see the man still come.

But no one had notified him.

The instructor sincerely apologized and bowed. Xie Lanshan gave the person an understanding smile and quickly called the bureau. Xiao Liang picked up the phone only to inform him an abrupt order had come from the provincial branch requesting that Xie Lanshan suspend all public security work immediately.

Xie Lanshan was puzzled, but Xiao Liang couldn't explain much over the phone, then quickly hung up after only giving him vague responses.

Xie Lanshan walked out of the university's building slightly in a daze and sat alone in a quiet corner of the campus on a stone bench. He'd chosen a spot in front of a little knoll known as the lover's hill of the university. Few were on campus at this time, but by the time the sky darkened, the hill would be filled with young students exchanging audible kisses symbolic of their beautiful romance.

Tao Jun had reminded Xie Lanshan to watch his image as a cop representing a new generation, so Xie Lanshan had cleaned himself up and put on a freshly ironed police uniform before coming to campus. His navy blue jacket matched his light blue collared shirt. The belt circled his thin but strapping waistline, and his clothes were perfectly tailored to the rest of his body. Xie Lanshan was already quite a handsome man, and the uniform only made his looks stand out more amongst a crowd.

Normal University had a much larger female student population than male. At least nine out of ten passersby were pretty young women. Naturally, all their eyes fell on Xie Lanshan like a horde of hungry wolves.

If this was any normal occasion when he was in a good mood, Xie Lanshan would have enjoyed these admiring gazes from the opposite sex and even returned them with a pretty smile or gaze.

But something felt off today. He'd worked in public security for long enough that he'd developed a sort of sixth sense for when something bad was about to occur.

Malaise swirled inside him until it became a raging whirlpool that churned his body from inside out. Xie Lanshan felt his throat dry and body become too hot. He took off his uniform jacket under the winter breeze.

It was strange—he'd never thought this uniform looked good and often would complain that its design was too fitted—too difficult to move around in during investigations.

But right at that moment, it looked beautiful in his eyes. He still remembered the day when he'd first received his uniform while in the police academy. He'd eagerly put the uniform on and heard two older women call him "Mr. Policeman." His face had reddened almost instantly.

Recalling it now, he wasn't sure why he had been so flustered back then. He only knew that the honor and pride that he received from this uniform itself was enough to engrave a powerful impression in his heart.

Xie Lanshan suddenly lifted a hand and touched his face as if he could touch that boiling passion inside him from many years ago through the chilling winds today.

His fingers retained this memory; every part of his body retained this memory. He remembered the hard material of this uniform pressing into his skin, the heavy weight of the epaulets, and the shining badge pinned on his chest.

He gently and reverently brushed his fingers against his uniform, his fingers passing over the embroidered flower on the collar, the rank badge, and pin, his heart pounding thunderously with every touch like he was caressing the skin of a lover.

Another chilling breeze blew by, but Xie Lanshan didn't feel cold even through the paltry single layer of his shirt. He only lifted his head to see a stretch of white exposed in the gray sky, like a cloth covering a corpse.

The weather really is about to change, he thought.

(ii)

An express package was delivered to the Handong Provincial Branch of Public Security, quickly yielding the results the sender had wickedly hoped for. Director Peng finished reading the contents and was furious after his initial shock.

Just before being invited to the director's office, Sui Hong received a call from Song Qilian. The woman seemed anxious and almost cried a few times during the call, explaining the files she'd kept of Ye Shen and that she'd threatened to send off had been taken by her ex-husband.

Director Peng's call arrived almost as soon as he hung up with Song Qilian.

There were no winners in a never-ending gamble and the worst was always bound to come sooner or later. Sui Hong let out a long breath of air; the burden weighing on his heart had finally lifted after all these years. He felt only a strange sense of relief. He sat quietly at his desk for a little while, held up the bottle of Nin Jiom Cough Syrup, and took a sip. Sui Hong then stood up and left his office, preparing himself for the upcoming storm.

In his office, Director Peng slapped those very files in Sui Hong's face and spared no mercy interrogating him. "Were you aware of this?"

Of course Director Peng already knew. Song Qilian had written a report that explained the entire situation in those files.

Sui Hong didn't give excuses or try to explain himself. He simply responded with the facts, "I knew. I made the decision due to the urgency of the situation at the time."

"This is outrageous!" Director Peng shook in anger and scolded Sui Hong. "You equipped this murderer with the training and instruction of our best cop? When you made this decision, did you never think about how disastrous the outcome would be if he were to go out of control? Considering his skills, if he decides to go under the radar, you'll never catch him if he ever goes rogue!"

Sui Hong gave a cough and didn't speak a word. He had considered this possibility, which was the exact reason he'd asked Liu Yanbo to not promote Xie Lanshan and had even requested Song Qilian to be his therapist.

"You got that criminal out of jail just before his execution, then changed all of his profile information," Director Peng said sharply. He was determined to get to the bottom of this and continued to question Sui Hong, "Who else is aware of this? Liu Yanbo? Tao Jun?"

"I acted upon my own judgment. Nobody else was involved or was made aware of it. They simply treated it as a special mission that I was in charge of and didn't

question me.”

“How *honorable* of you!” Director Peng’s rage finally extinguished. The only emotions left now were ridicule and disbelief. He shook his head and let out a long sigh.

The director’s concern was that this was the very first operation of its kind in human history and no one could say what would happen in the future. However, under his understanding and the current state of technology, this brain transplant would be no different from a heart transplant. From a medical perspective, the Xie Lanshan right now was, of course, not a cop but a criminal on death row. No matter how many people the murderer had saved or how many cases he solved under a cop’s name, his previous crimes couldn’t be excused.

Therefore, Director Peng made it clear that Ye Shen would be taken back and executed as he had been scheduled to be.

Sui Hong had expected to receive this response, but he still wished to turn the tables. He lowered his head and slowly kneeled down before his old boss.

Peng Huaili was shocked. Men rarely yielded to this extent, but Sui Hong was also a cop Director Peng had personally mentored since he was young. He knew this captain was made of steel and remained unfazed even at a criminal’s gunpoint. The man before him would not bow easily to anyone.

“Director, I’ve never asked you for anything in all these years I’ve worked for you. This is the only thing I beg of you; I will shoulder all consequences if necessary. I can be suspended from my post, I can go to jail, but I am begging you to please give a-Lan one more chance...” Sui Hong lifted his head. A single tear rolled down his cheek as he continued with trembling lips, “He’s a good cop, perhaps even the best I’ve ever seen in my life. Please, can you give him just one more chance?”

Through this, Sui Hong bought a single opportunity under one condition from Director Peng. He needed to prove that Xie Lanshan was still the same cop they knew—the dignified and respected member of public security, and not the infamous Ye Shen from those files, who had a dark history and slept around without regard for gender.

The ultimatum was still one last ray of hope to cling to, so Sui Hong planned on visiting Hanhai. He summoned Ling Yun and said that he would be on an extended vacation with no expected return date, so the team’s operation would temporarily fall into the hands of the young officers.

Chi Jin was second-in-command of the Blue Fox. Ling Yun wasn’t sure why Sui Hong suddenly requested time off, nor why he was notified first instead of their vice captain. He asked with hesitation, “Should I bring Chi Jin over?”

Sui Hong thought about it before shaking his head. “Tell him after I leave. He’s too rash. He may do something out of line again. I want you to keep an eye on him and make sure to stop him when he goes overboard.”

Ling Yun nodded. Sui Hong then delegated some tasks regarding the investigations on Mu Kun and the red-ice case, then sent the young man out of his office.

Only one figure remained inside. The sun began to fall west; rays of warm light shone through the window and onto the bottle of Nin Jiom Cough Syrup.

It wasn't that Captain Sui was a coldhearted man with no interest in human desires, but even at the age of thirty-six, he had yet to find a person whom he could truly trust to be on his side, which certainly was a bit odd.

He'd had a short-lived courtship with someone about seven or eight years ago. His family had asked a friend to introduce him to a young woman around his age; she was fine and pretty. Sui Hong was never very enthusiastic about these sorts of blind dates and setups, but he still ended up seeing the young woman twice out of courtesy. She seemed to have a good impression of him, but they didn't hit it off and eventually went out of contact.

To Sui Hong, marriage was a heavy burden. On one hand, he certainly never gave much thought to it, but on the other, he also knew how dangerous his job was and didn't want to drag a young woman into potential trouble.

His family had argued with him a few times over this, and Sui Hong had always given a half-joking response that he would rather give his life in the name of public security than seriously consider such a trivial matter. After a while, his family also gave up on trying to find him a partner.

One small and relevant anecdote of interest came about when Sui Hong mentioned having an arranged marriage to Chi Jin. During the casual conversation, he had spoken with a joking tone, but the then high school boy's expression changed as he sternly told Sui Hong two words: "You can't."

"Now that's harsh. The girl is nice. She's very passionate and smart too. Besides, I like the shape of her eyes." Sui Hong teased him, then said, "People need to be with one another and have a home to survive in this world."

Chi Jin's face froze immediately. His heart was crushed by those words. He furrowed his eyebrows and pondered for a bit, then placed a hand on his heart and said as if he was making an oath, "Then *I'll* stay by your side."

Sui Hong was taken aback and stared wordlessly at the young man.

"Can you wait a few more years? Five—just five more years should be enough." The teen pressed a hand on his chest as if reciting some cheesy soap opera line, then held the other hand out with his pinkie up. His gaze was blazing, but his tone was warm and firm. "Wait until I grow older, until I learn more about love and relationships; wait until I can fight for you and for my country."

Sui Hong let his mind wander just before he left the provincial branch office. He gently turned the bottle of Nin Jiom Cough Syrup on his desk, recalling the bittersweet taste it left on his tongue.

To Shen Liufei, Xie Lanshan's ex-captain was only a name. He had never met the person in question, though he'd heard many stories of the officer's feats. This was

why he never would have expected the man to pay him a personal visit.

The man in front of the door said, "My name is Sui Hong. You may have heard from Xie Lanshan already, but I was his captain when he was still in the Blue Fox."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Shen Liufei gave the man a nod and invited him in.

Shen Liufei had a great first impression of the man. He felt a sense of familiarity despite this being their first meeting. The man was, as Xie Lanshan had described, a dignified and distinctive individual who stood out amongst the crowd. Sui Hong was also surprised to find that the famous artist and professional was such a young and handsome man.

"We have a mutual friend between us," Sui Hong spoke up, bypassing the small talk. "Doctor Duan."

Shen Liufei's eyebrows pressed together slightly, knowing that the guest had come prepared and that Duan Licheng had exposed his secret.

Sui Hong explained that the provincial branch was aware of Xie Lanshan's situation now.

The guillotine blade hung above Xie Lanshan's head. Shen Liufei said after a long silence, "And this is the reason for your suspension?"

Sui Hong nodded. "I've already done my best to convince our director to give him a chance."

He mentioned Song Qilian and the guilt she felt for her mistakes, that she wanted to do something to repent for the trouble she had caused. She'd bravely given a suggestion to Xie Lanshan's former captain; if Xie Lanshan could prove he'd never had a change of heart for his first love and married her, Director Peng would have no reason to suspect that he was Ye Shen.

After giving it long and thorough consideration, Sui Hong had agreed with the idea.

"He's Xie Lanshan, not Ye Shen. To keep him alive, he can only ever be Xie Lanshan from now on."

There was no need to make things any clearer. Shen Liufei already knew what Sui Hong wanted to say. The captain was asking the young man to make a sacrifice for everyone's sake, including Xie Lanshan, even if doing so meant bringing immense pain to the very person himself.

"Please return him to Qilian," Sui Hong said to him. "Please, give Xie Lanshan back to Song Qilian."

(iii)

"No."

Sui Hong was taken aback; Shen Liufei looked like an easygoing artist, so he was shocked to find that the man would be so stern and straightforward in his rejection.

“No,” Shen Liufei repeated. He poured half a glass of fine red wine for Sui Hong and then another half glass for himself. His expression was calm with no signs of anger, as he said, “You’ve used him enough. You pulled out the last bit of life in him, then took it apart and forced it into a body he would never accept. Have you even asked for his consent on any of this?”

Sui Hong took the wineglass from him and downed the alcohol despite never touching liquor in public spaces. At that moment, he was using it to drown out all the guilt he had kept inside him over the years.

The wine was fine; it was sweet and smooth as it went down his throat. Sui Hong knew he was lying to himself but still said after a sigh, “He once swore to give everything he had for the drug enforcement team; he voluntarily signed the form to donate his body upon death. I know a-Lan too well. I know his kindness and benevolence, his loyalty and courage. If I’d had the chance to ask him for his opinion back then, he would have agreed.”

“What about this time?”

Sui Hong placed the glass down and let out another sigh. He was desperately grasping for any solution to problems of both the past and present.

Shen Liufei took a sip of his wine and then turned to Sui Hong. His expression was still blank, but something else glowed in his eyes.

“If you truly think he is the best officer you’ve had, then give him a chance to decide for himself,” Shen Liufei responded. “As for me, I will stay by his side until the day he no longer needs me.”

“I’m sorry, this was indeed too sudden of a request.” Sui Hong recognized his wrongdoing and stood up, ready to take his leave. He then turned his head just before he stepped out of the door and asked Shen Liufei, “Can you really accept that he is Ye Shen? Can you truly love a man who murdered your family with all of your heart?”

Shen Liufei blanked for a moment, but by the time he came back to his senses, Sui Hong had already left.

He walked toward the window, opened it, and let the breeze blow on his face. He lifted his head to gaze at the lofty sky and birds flying through the night. *Perhaps that was a little too much wine*, he thought. He was slightly tipsy and couldn’t bring himself to answer Sui Hong’s last question.

Xie Lanshan returned home at 9 P.M.

“What’s all this? My last supper?” The dishes on the table were already cold, but the variety still made the food worth digging into. Xie Lanshan rushed straight in as soon as he stepped through the door, gleefully shoving his head toward the table. He lifted his head and grinned. “Hey, cuz, I’d give you the whole rest of my life just for these salt-and-vinegar pork ribs.”

Shen Liufei preferred Western dishes but knew Xie Lanshan liked Chinese cuisine, so he’d stepped into the kitchen to cook some homey dishes before Xie Lanshan had returned from work.

“Take off your jacket and eat,” Shen Liufei said. He glanced at Xie Lanshan, who was still wearing his full uniform and even his cap. Shen Liufei joked, “Mister Policeman, there’s no need to dress up like that at home.”

The words “Mister Policeman” once again brought back sweet, young memories. Xie Lanshan was ready to take his jacket off but suddenly decided against it as he brushed his fingertips against his buttons. He only took off his hat, ran a hand through his slightly long hair, and leaned in toward Shen Liufei, begging, “Can’t I just eat like this?”

Shen Liufei knew it was a joke and didn’t respond, instead asking, “How was the event today? It certainly took you a while.”

Xie Lanshan was on his way to reheat the dishes when he heard this. His hand paused right before the microwave door and he lowered his head.

After a long silence, he finally said, “I... got suspended from work today.”

Shen Liufei’s heart squeezed; perhaps the situation really was bad enough to necessitate Sui Hong’s visit. Despite already knowing the answer, he asked, “Did they explain why?”

“It’s not that big of a deal. I can think about whether or not I want to get a new job.” Xie Lanshan could feel his stomach aching from hunger. He placed the dishes into the microwave and pressed start after setting it to the precise temperature and time.

The microwave hummed a muffled buzz while the aroma of food once again filled the room. Xie Lanshan turned around and said nonchalantly, “C’mon, who’d wanna be a cop anyway? You give your blood and sweat for a pittance of a salary. If you do well, you’re told it’s what you’re supposed to do, and if you screw up even just a little bit, it might just come back to bite you. Have you heard of that phrase online? What a peaceful and happy world we live in, but y’all can only live in safety because people like us do the damn work!”

Xie Lanshan had never complained about his job, and even if he had shed literal sweat and blood for the sake of it, he only ever swallowed up his complaints and kept them inside.

Shen Liufei watched him in silence. The man seemed to be quite riled up today and continued on in excitement after licking his lips, “There was one time while I was undercover, just right after I passed on the intel to the person from the team, when Mu Kun’s men tailed us. It was too late for me to run by the time I escorted the guy out, so I could only hide. Our agent was out in an abandoned factory that hadn’t been touched in years. All of the tunnels and pipes were rusted, the insulation layer around them was long gone—Ling Yun said he had to hide in turbid water once to capture a drug dealer, but that was nothing compared to what I had to do! Try leaning on scorching hot broken pipes, it’s the fucking same as being tortured, I tell you!” Xie Lanshan could still remember hiding from Gold Tooth. He’d hidden in the dark, his back stuck to a wall of exposed steam pipes. He’d had to clench his teeth and keep as

quiet as he could.

As curses continued to spew out of his mouth, it became more difficult to tell whether the man was happy or upset. Xie Lanshan seemed to find the story more amusing the more he talked about it, and he laughed as he turned to Shen Liufei. “Hey, cuz, have you ever smelled your own flesh being grilled in real time? It’s damn nasty. It was so bad that I couldn’t even stand the smell of meat for a whole month after.”

No wonder why he couldn’t remember where his injuries were; only someone who had never been hurt would panic over a cut and remember where it was. He’d suffered so much, but like salt melting into seawater, he’d grown used to it and couldn’t even tell how much pain he’d been through.

“There was another time we were chasing down a thief on the streets. The kid wasn’t watching where he was going and stepped right into a pool of animal waste. It was a three-meter-deep well filled with poisonous gas. Any average man who fell down it would die. Tao Longyue pinched his nose and said he couldn’t do it, so I tied a rope around myself and went down. When I brought that kid up, someone even asked me, ‘Why are you risking your life to save a thief like him?’ Tell me, it’s just one damn human life. Why should I risk my own safety to save him?” Xie Lanshan’s throat tickled as if he was disgusted by this particular memory. He then laughed as he coughed. The laughing and coughing grew louder and more violent until his entire mouth was filled with the bloody taste he’d coughed up from his lungs.

One couldn’t laugh away years of bitterness and hatred, but in the very least, he felt a sense of relief in that moment.

Shen Liufei listened to him with his eyebrows pressed together, not interrupting the storm. He waited until Xie Lanshan’s venting was over and finally called out the man’s name softly, “A-Lan.”

“All right, that’s enough.” Xie Lanshan stopped laughing after realizing he was losing control of himself. His expression became stern, then he turned to Shen Liufei with a glint in his eyes as he pressed his palms together and said, “Let’s get in bed.”

The act that followed would most accurately be described as beastly intercourse. They brawled naked but with no sense of comfort.

Xie Lanshan led the whole way, riding enthusiastically on top and cooperating passionately when moved to the bottom. He was letting himself out with dramatic gestures and loud moans, as if he was the one taking advantage of the situation.

Shen Liufei could feel his hardened cock tightly enveloped by warm flesh, but it wasn’t the most comfortable feeling. He wanted to pull out but couldn’t bring himself to do so. It wasn’t because he enjoyed this slight discomfort of the chafing skin, he knew that there was a bigger hole in Xie Lanshan’s heart right now. It had to be painful to bear, and the man was yearning to have someone fill it.

So Shen Liufei allowed the man to take control while he joined in, seeing the farce through to the end.

To his surprise, Xie Lanshan was extra clingy today. As soon as Shen Liufei was done and pulled himself out of Xie Lanshan, the latter quickly crawled back up and held on to his lover's exposed chest.

"Get up, I want more."

Without shying away, Xie Lanshan pulled off the used condom and placed his head into Shen Liufei's crotch. To add on to the tease, he pinched the skin of his lover's backside, feeling the smooth but taut muscles under his hands.

Shen Liufei had impressive assets. Even after two rounds, his girth was still alluring to a thirsty Xie Lanshan. Of course, fatigue took a toll, and it wasn't easy to go straight to round three. Xie Lanshan wasn't about to give up and bit down when he realized fiddling with his hands wouldn't do.

"Enough," Shen Liufei scolded him.

But Xie Lanshan didn't listen and continued fiddling until it became slightly painful.

The more he was scolded, the more Xie Lanshan fiddled and teased. After some muffled whines, Xie Lanshan once again mouthed the cock as he pressed on Shen Liufei's scrotum.

Shen Liufei's eyebrow twitched in pain from this abrasive action, and he instinctively pushed Xie Lanshan away. This shoved Xie Lanshan down along with his manic sex drive, and he lowered his face.

It was as if he'd been pushed straight into an abyss from his zenith. He was done playing mad, he was exhausted and hurt, and he finally closed his eyes as though he were in a helpless trance.

"I really..." Xie Lanshan tilted his head, allowing a single tear to roll down his cheek. He repeated in desperation, gently, "I really want to be a good cop... a good cop like my dad..."

Shen Liufei's heart ached. He closed his eyes, leaned down, and pressed his lips on Xie Lanshan's. Slowly but surely, he deepened the kiss with his tongue.

This began to refuel his body, and he felt his lower body hardening, then Shen Liufei once again let himself inside his lover.

This time, they were gentle and calm like the peaceful weather after a storm. Xie Lanshan was already exhausted and let Shen Liufei lead the way. His body moved with his lover as his consciousness began to fade into an orgasm, all as he continued mumbling away words like "good person" and "cop" until he could no longer formulate proper sentences.

Xie Lanshan was disheveled from the act and lay half-conscious on the bed. He hadn't bothered taking off his uniform shirt, so only his lower body was exposed. Their fluids and sweat had mingled, emitting a faint but raw scent that lingered.

The cop's uniform was made of hard fabric, so Shen Liufei took the clothes off to let Xie Lanshan sleep more comfortably. He then pulled the naked man into an embrace and gently placed a kiss between Xie Lanshan's eyebrows.

He's still frowning even in his sleep, Shen Liufei thought. Everything must have taken a toll on him.

It was as if Xie Lanshan was standing in the eye of a storm, by the edge of a cliff, reaching out for Shen Liufei to pull him out.

After tucking his lover into bed, Shen Liufei stood up and walked into the bathroom, still unclothed. He turned on the shower and cleaned himself while the water was still cold.

It was a wintry midnight. The cold water washed away the lingering fire in his body; his muscles first instinctually tensed to fight against the cold, and his skin reddened from the temperature of the water, then quickly returned to an icy white. His body began twitching slightly in response, seemingly giving life to the blooming flower and phoenix tattoo etched on his shoulders and back.

Two invisible forces engaged in a tug-of-war within him. Shen Liufei closed his eyes amidst this self-sabotaging pain, hanging his forehead on the wet walls of the shower as he cleaned the clinging fluids from his lower body.

He still couldn't respond to Sui Hong's question.

It was a passionate and emotional night. He loved everything about Xie Lanshan but also resented the secret he couldn't afford to share.

(iv)

When questioned about Xie Lanshan's suspension, the higher-ups only claimed the decision was a managerial adjustment and gave no chance for follow-ups. Rumors spread within the municipal bureau as people speculated about how it could be related to Sui Hong's leave, that perhaps something had gone wrong during the undercover mission in the Golden Triangle.

But that was a trivial matter to most right now. Compared to the growing market of new illegal substances and rising drug abuse cases, a lone policeman's personal issues were nothing to be concerned about.

Besides, young Captain Tao of the violent crimes unit was about to get married.

As his childhood friend and the closest buddy of the groom, Xie Lanshan was naturally the best man, while the bridesmaid was the only female member on the team, Ding Li.

In the face of an important life event, Tao Longyue wanted to host a grand wedding, but Su Mansheng was reluctant to make a spectacle of the affair and preferred just to sign papers. The two finally took a step back and agreed on a simple but efficient wedding ceremony, inviting only friends and family over for dinner.

So Xie Lanshan was surprised to see Peng Huaili on the list of guests invited to the wedding that day.

"It's for your sake." The dressing room in the hotel was a little cramped. Tao Longyue was still handsome and stylish in the groom's suit, but the silly man couldn't

get his tie tied properly.

“For me?” Xie Lanshan was helping his buddy with the tie when he heard that, then playfully teased Tao Longyue under the chin and smiled. “You can love me a little less now that you’re getting married.”

The two men were already facing each other, but they were extremely close in their current position. Tao Longyue noticed that Xie Lanshan’s eyes were more beautiful than he’d thought; the man had long lashes, and his features were sharp and well sculpted. This playful little gesture and deep look from him would look like a beautiful encounter or an exchange of sweet nothings to any prying eyes.

Tao Longyue felt his heart skip a beat and he blurted out, “Don’t you try and flirt with me or give me that look, stop trying to turn your bestie gay on the day of his wedding!”

Xie Lanshan lowered his head with a smile, then went back to carefully helping the groom with his tie. He wasn’t satisfied the first time and redid it.

“Director Peng used to mentor our dads. He’s pretty close to us. I thought he wasn’t going to come because of his busy schedule.” Tao Longyue truly was trying to help Xie Lanshan out. Next, he said, “I just wanted to help find a chance for you to talk to Director Peng.”

Xie Lanshan wasn’t too enthusiastic about this idea and asked, “Talk about what?”

“Are you stupid? Let the things in the past stay there and prove yourself today. Talk about how you saved that whole ship of little Barbies on that cruise, or that other one, the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* case. Just talk about how you fished out the culprit nobody could have thought of and shot those illegal artifact merchants in the foot—”

“All right, don’t forget that you’re the main act today.” Xie Lanshan understood Tao Longyue’s concern but also knew it wasn’t something that could possibly be solved through just a few good cases in his file. Despite not having confirmation, he’d found many clues pointing to the possibility that he wasn’t the person he thought he was. If he *was* still Xie Lanshan, how could he explain his jumbled memories, his pristine body, and the loss of control he started to display? If he wasn’t, then how could any of the deeds that “Xie Lanshan” had done in the past help him?

He didn’t want to kill the mood at his best buddy’s wedding. Xie Lanshan swallowed the bitterness inside him and fixed the tie, then gave Tao Longyue one last look from top to bottom. After confirming the groom was at his most handsome, Xie Lanshan grinned and gave the man a hug. He whispered gently into Tao Longyue’s ear, “You just take care of your own responsibilities and support your family. Su Mansheng is an incredible woman. You’re lucky to have her in your life.”

Tao Longyue returned the tight embrace. Words were no longer needed between the two.

The door to the dressing room opened suddenly. Song Qilian donned a brilliant white dress and stood like a fine lily flower by the door. She said to Tao Longyue, “The guests are starting to arrive.”

Ding Li wore a cute but fancy bridesmaid outfit as she poked her little head out from behind Song Qilian. She had her attention on the best man, and gasped in delight when she saw his well-dressed figure. “Xie-bro, you’re killin’ it with that outfit! Hey, if you ever decide to get married one day, would you consider taking me as your bride?”

Tao Longyue was more delighted at this prospect than the man in question. The scar on his forehead rose as he gave her a thumbs-up. “That’s right, our a-Lan here is the most handsome cop in all of Hanhai—no, all of China!”

As Song Qilian stood still, a complex expression formed on her face. She once again reminded Tao Longyue, “Director Peng is here, and your dad’s asking you to hurry up.”

Xie Lanshan was also ready to help greet the guests as his best man, but just before he stepped out, Song Qilian stood before him and said, “I’d like to speak with you privately.”

Song Qilian seemed to be a little hesitant when she gingerly stepped into the room. As she walked toward Xie Lanshan like a gust of smoke, even her expression appeared cloudy. She said, “You once told me that you would give your life to protect me any time. Is that still true?”

Xie Lanshan was taken aback for a moment before he nodded. “Of course.”

“As long as that’s what you want to do then. But I don’t want you to give your life to me.” Song Qilian paused, then mustered up some courage and said, “I want you to use me instead.”

“Qilian...” Xie Lanshan grew more puzzled, unsure what she was trying to say.

“What you’re about to hear from me now may sound completely incomprehensible to you, but please trust me. Every word I speak is the truth, and I promise I will never harm you.”

Beautiful white lilies decorated the location where the wedding ceremony would be held; these were flowers Song Qilian had picked out for Su Mansheng. The faint floral scent filled the space, making the venue smell both sweet and bitter. Song Qilian opened, then closed her mouth a few times, still contemplating what to say. Finally, she confessed it all to Xie Lanshan.

“As a person, Xie Lanshan is—you—are already dead.”

There was nothing more satirical than having someone else tell you to your face that you are already dead. Xie Lanshan took a step back in a daze. His gaze was both helpless and fearful, like a lost child’s. Song Qilian quickly noticed that he hadn’t broken down immediately or lost control of himself as she had expected him to. The despair in his eyes appeared and vanished within moments; the only thing that had ever stood before him and the truth was merely a thin piece of paper, not a tall fortress. He’d always been wandering in the winds behind that paper window, knowing the world behind it would only lead him to the brink of destruction and an eternal farewell.

As tears threatened to roll down her cheeks, Song Qilian continued, “Just a month before you would have finished your job undercover, you gave your life on the line—your physical body died in a dark and cold alleyway...”

He recalled the time when Gold Tooth had used his men to lure him into that cramped alley, and the final strike on his head by a heavy metal pole.

“Captain Sui cooperated with the US military to transplant your brain into the body of a death-row inmate named Ye Shen through a top-secret and incredibly dangerous surgery. Ye Shen killed a family of six when he was fourteen and then later a young woman named Zhuo Tian as an adult.”

When the words “death-row inmate” came out, the explanation behind all his bloodstained dreams of violence and murder became crystal clear. Xie Lanshan’s lips twitched; this was even more disturbing news to him than learning about his own death.

“Duan Licheng joined in on your operation as a specialist from the US forces, and he was the one who gave this information to Shen Liufei.” Song Qilian took a step forward and placed a gentle hand on Xie Lanshan’s face. “Shen Liufei came for Ye Shen. He was the only survivor of the murdered family...”

It felt like something heavy pounded against his heart, but instead of feeling the pain of his heart bleeding, he only felt heavy.

It was as though he were standing alone in the center of the world. All the cold eyes landed on him from everyone around. Xie Lanshan frowned. He stared at the woman before him with guilt and confusion.

Song Qilian brushed her fingers gently against his slightly glistening eyes and caressed his face as if she was touching the most precious treasure in the world. Her hands were like the warm sun that kindly shone on his face. She was in awe and full of disbelief; she marveled at what had to be a miracle of creation, as the two men shared almost an identical face. However, upon closer inspection, the two were also different. Xie Lanshan was more proper and cleaner, but this face was a little more apathetic and lethargic. The man she loved had quietly left everyone for six whole years—enough time for them all to overlook the little bit of difference.

The Xie Lanshan before her right now didn’t reject her touch as she had expected, just like the night when he hadn’t rejected her kiss.

This situation was unprecedented, so Song Qilian could only rely on her professional knowledge and treat him as a case of dissociative identity disorder. She needed to carefully interact with him, guide him to recall his memories, then finally lead his main personality back to his place.

“Director Peng is here today to see if there are traces of Ye Shen on you, so I’ve asked Mansheng to toss her bouquet at me today, to let him know that you haven’t changed. He’ll see that you’ll soon build a family for yourself just like you said you would in the past...”

The man before her stood frozen to the spot. His eyes also stopped blinking for a while. Finally, Song Qilian took out a small wooden sculpture from her purse and carefully placed it in Xie Lanshan's hand.

She had played with this figure so often over the years that the carving's face had smoothed out. The sculpture looked as if it was rusted, but it was simply dyed with the blood of the sculptor and could no longer be wiped off.

The same wedding scenery triggered another piece of memory that was close to fading away. Xie Lanshan finally pulled his senses back as if he had woken from a stiff daze. As he looked down at the carving, his heart sank in an indescribable manner.

Song Qilian firmly believed that even if this man only held a portion of Xie Lanshan's memories, that part of him was powerful and still a piece of his soul. She also believed that this man she had loved since she was twelve would return her love.

"Use me," she said as she cupped Xie Lanshan's face. She lifted her gaze and pleaded in desperation, "Just let it be my way of making it up to you; we were never supposed to have walked away from each other back then."

(v)

Su Mansheng donned a fitted and simple mermaid-style wedding dress. No fancy laces or decorations adorned her garment. Even her makeup was quite simplistic, but she herself was already beautiful. Her tall and slender figure captured the attention of everyone as she walked toward the crowd. Tao Longyue felt more like a bodyguard than the groom as he watched, but his heart was full of warmth. He lifted his head to see Xie Lanshan step out of the dressing room, then asked cheerily without noticing the strange expression on his best man's face, "Hey, where's your boyfriend?"

Song Qilian took her son to pay Grandpa Liu Yanbo a visit. Xie Lanshan walked past Tao Longyue as if he hadn't even noticed being called. He walked with a hollow gaze down the hall.

Tao Longyue rushed forward and tapped him on his shoulder, then said, "Director Peng wants to meet Shen Liufei. He's holding a bit of a grudge against us because the Hanhai Bureau kept the professional the provincial branch sponsored to fly in..."

Shen Liufei is "trapped" here in Hanhai because of his need for vengeance, Xie Lanshan thought as he turned around in a daze to stare at Tao Longyue. His eyes were filled with anger and pain like a stray dog kicked to the side of the road by a pedestrian.

Tao Longyue was shocked by his best friend's look and noticed something was off, then asked, "What's up? Do you feel sick?"

"No... it's nothing." Xie Lanshan attempted to recall where Shen Liufei had gone that day but didn't have a clue—it was almost as if any memories connected to the name had become a blur. Sweetness and bitterness swarmed him and gave him a

headache. He stuttered a little and said, "Duan Licheng is going back to the States today... maybe, maybe he sent the doctor off and will be here a little later..."

"All right, that's fine. We all know each other here, no need for the best man to stand around and greet every guest, go take a seat." Tao Longyue gave Xie Lanshan's shoulder a pat and whispered into his ear, "You're seated with Director Peng. Don't forget what I said and be on your best behavior!"

Shen Liufei had indeed taken the doctor to the airport. Duan Licheng had bought two tickets, hoping to bring the artist along with him, but had failed in the end.

He shook his head and gave a defeated smile to Shen Liufei as he was about to board, then said, "I miss the time when we first met. You were young and weak back then, but you trusted me without question and relied on me."

Shen Liufei lowered his gaze and listened to the man speak, remembering what he owed the doctor.

"I'm very grateful to you for caring for me when I was severely ill, and for giving me a second chance in life." Shen Liufei's expression remained blank but the genuine sentiment could be heard in his words. He asked, "But you can no longer work as a surgeon in the States, what do you plan on doing in the future?"

"I have plans already," Duan Licheng smiled and embraced the young man.

Like dazzling stars in the sky, thousands of lights filled the cityscape at that hour. Shen Liufei walked out of the airport and checked the time. It was thirty minutes before Captain Tao's wedding, and traffic would take a little while even if he drove back right now.

A young Thai couple walked past him with all sorts of luggage, rushing to board their airplane. This suddenly reminded him of Tang Xiaomo once again. Shen Liufei didn't normally check social media. He'd only saved the few photos she had posted on her Weibo after she went missing. He pulled up a photo on his phone and noticed a minor detail that he'd missed before.

In the last selfie Tang Xiaomo had posted, the figure of a man with blurry features was in the background. The man stood far away behind her, but he stared menacingly at the young girl.

Tao Longyue's wedding had just started. Captain Tao was an expressive and emotional man despite his looks; he cried once while saying his vows to his bride, then cried once more while thanking his father. When Xiao Liang and the crew egged him on to sing, the man belted out a number in an off-tune voice that sounded more like whimpering than singing.

Tao Jun took this opportunity to report his work to his boss on this wonderful day, only to have Director Peng interrupt with a laugh, "We're not talking about work today, just family affairs. A good man who protects his people deserves a good home

to rest too.”

Xie Lanshan sat diagonally across from the man.

Director Peng acted as if he hadn't heard about Xie Lanshan being suspended from work and asked, “Oh, young Xie, I heard that you've been doing well in the investigation unit. You've even helped solve some big cases, huh?”

Xie Lanshan didn't seem to have heard the question. He lifted his head to look at Director Peng and gave a small sound of acknowledgment.

Director Peng looked at him and said, “I've told you before you went undercover that you can only shoulder what you can protect. If you succeed, you'll return as a hero, but if you fail, you'll be like Ma Su, who failed to protect his town. No matter how reluctant you are, you need to uphold the rule of law and punishment. Am I right?”

The story of Ma Su was a famous tale in the history of the Three Kingdoms, but as for the ending General Ma Su had suffered? He was executed at Zhuge Liang's orders and fell to atone for his mistakes.

Song Qilian sat beside Xie Lanshan and understood the unspoken words behind this line. Her face grew pale, and she was left speechless.

Two dishes were served on the table: one was a neatly prepared shellfish dish, while the other was raw oyster with dipping sauce. The placement of the utensils and plates showed elegant taste. The bureau might be full of a lot of big eaters, but no one was particularly keen on seafood or shellfish. Tao Longyue was quite shocked at the raw seafood. He turned to say to his bride, “I don't think we had these on the menu.”

Su Mansheng shook her head, saying she'd been unaware of the changes as well.

That was when Liu Mingfang and his father walked over to offer a glass to their boss. The young Liu first nodded toward Tao Longyue and then said with a smile, “Sorry, bro, I didn't prepare enough red envelopes for this event. Thankfully, I've frequented this hotel in the past for work, so I went ahead and told the chefs to add two extra dishes for us. I hope everyone enjoys them.”

Liu Mingfang was seated at a different table with his father. Of course, Tao Longyue hadn't even wanted to invite the man, but Tao Jun insisted it would be discourteous to Chief Liu if he hadn't. The three boys had also grown up together, so even if some hiccups had occurred in their youth, it was all in the past.

Liu Yanbo greeted the old director and introduced his son, offering more wine and tobacco.

Liu Mingfang finally noticed Xie Lanshan on the side after greeting Director Peng. He went up and tapped on the man's shoulder, asking, “I added these two dishes for you, why aren't you even moving those chopsticks?”

Before Xie Lanshan could answer, he eyed Director Peng and then called out to Tao Longyue, “Remember when we all went to Qingdao that time in college? We went fishing for our own shellfish and seafood in the waters and beaches, then finished whole buckets of them between just the three of us and some beer. Hey, do

you remember that, ol' Tao?"

Tao Longyue dug through his memories to recall this event and nodded. "I think... I remember that..."

Liu Mingfang turned back to Xie Lanshan and placed two raw oysters on Xie Lanshan's plate with the serving chopsticks. He then said with a smile, "I remember these were your favorite. I swear if you don't eat at least ten of them, we ain't bros anymore!"

Regardless of whether it was his favorite, with dozens of eyes on him now, he had no way to refuse. This was obviously a ploy by Liu Mingfang; if he refused it would show he couldn't take a joke, but what if he accepted? Xie Lanshan knew he couldn't touch shellfish. Even a tiny bit could trigger his allergic reaction, and a severe reaction could cause his heart to stop. Both Song Qilian and Peng Huaili knew this.

Director Peng pressed his eyebrows together slightly and observed Xie Lanshan like a hawk. He wanted to know if he'd retrieved Ye Shen's memories.

"I... today..." Xie Lanshan wanted to find an excuse for not feeling well. That was when Song Qilian suddenly held his hand and shook her head, giving him a smile.

"Let me say it." Song Qilian found Su Mansheng on the other side and gave her a small grin. "I'm waiting to catch your bouquet later."

Shen Liufei had arrived at the venue five minutes ago, but he sat in the back and wasn't anywhere near the main table. He wasn't fond of chatting with strangers, but he and Xie Lanshan had agreed to keep away from each other in public after they'd officially gotten together. That especially applied in a place filled with men like the police department. They put in additional care not to expose their relationship.

He saw Song Qilian hold Xie Lanshan's hand and how she caught Su Mansheng's bouquet. She announced in front of everyone that she was about to be engaged to Xie Lanshan.

"Huh?"

Now everyone's attention had shifted away from the oysters on the plate. The groom was shocked and Old Tao was speechless; Liu Mingfang was ready to curse when his old man stopped him with a threatening glare. It was improper to act out of line before his seniors.

"I mean that's great news, congrats... but..." Tao Longyue stared dumbly at Xie Lanshan, unable to process everything at once. *Hold on, this wasn't what we had written in the script!*

"We've been together since before he went undercover, but he left for six years and didn't speak a word about his undercover mission to me. I'm also to blame for being young and foolish. I couldn't keep him, but I didn't wait for him either. Now he's safe and back home. He's solved many cases and served the community, with many injuries to prove it. He's even saved me from danger a few times. We trust that we still have feelings for each other, so we wanted to make up for all the time we've lost together." Song Qilian shed a tear as she held the beautiful bouquet in her hands and

reminded Director Peng of everything Xie Lanshan had done as a cop. She then turned and said to him, “Director Peng, can we ask you to officiate the wedding for us?”

Director Peng gave Song Qilian a smile. His expression softened, and he turned to Tao Jun. “Is this true?”

“Of course. If a-Lan had never gone to the Golden Triangle back then, their kids would probably be calling me ‘grandpa’ by now,” Tao Jun admitted truthfully and sincerely. He had always hoped Xie Lanshan would step back into the peaceful world and live a fulfilling life that could let his father’s soul rest at peace.

“Yes, young Xie has sacrificed too much...” The coldness on Director Peng’s face melted a little more. He finally remembered the blood and sweat the young man had shed, the sacrifices he’d made, and felt both pained and relieved. He turned and gave Song Qilian a grin and promised her, “A hero and a beauty’s wedding is as beautiful as a love story. I promise I will be there!”

The chain of events kept coming as if there was no end. Xie Lanshan seemed to have tacitly acknowledged the relationship and gave little response from start to finish. His eyes were still clouded from shock and were grim. All sorts of awful emotions overflowed from him. He really needed someone to hold him.

His fingers brushed against the wooden carving beneath the table, then his gaze fell on Shen Liufei, who was seated far away from him. He saw Shen Liufei lower his gaze, and turned around.

“I want to bring Mom back to stay with us after we marry. She’s stable now and she can’t live in the psych ward forever...” Song Qilian held Xie Lanshan’s hand again and gave him a smile. “How about it, a-Lan?”

Xie Lanshan could only force out a smile under Peng Huaili’s gaze and nod in agreement.

Tao Jun hadn’t had a good drink since he’d gotten sick. He downed another glass of wine, then turned to Xie Lanshan and said, “I’m relieved now to see that both of you are going to have families of your own. Don’t bother too much with fancy setups. Do it like Longyue. Find a good date, and set up a simple wedding.”

Song Qilian responded by becoming flustered, but Xie Lanshan didn’t catch what she said.

He was still playing with that wooden carving beneath that table. Once, he had yearned for love as clean and straightforward as his carving; it had also been his way of proving his existence in this world. He had once loved carving little animals for her. He would feel happy when she laughed at receiving those little gifts. The two didn’t need passionate love or romance between them. He had always wanted to bring the young woman to the site of old Xie’s tombstone and feel the breeze—he’d wanted her to stand by him and for her to address the same grave marker as “Dad” with him.

Xie Lanshan traced the face of the carving with his fingers only to discover that he could no longer trace the shape of her face in his head. The memories were carved

into his soul, but even if he'd never made this unexpected encounter with the woman of the carving many years later, the past would still remain behind him.

"Qilian, winter is a slow time for weddings. It's easy to book hotels and chapels now, but I'm sure it'll become difficult if you drag it out too long."

"I understand." Song Qilian smiled toward Tao Longyue, happy that everything was progressing as she had expected. She then turned back to Xie Lanshan and said, "But we still have to listen to a-Lan's opinions. He's not in a rush and neither am I—a-Lan, what do you say?"

Xie Lanshan didn't respond.

"A-Lan?" Tao Longyue called out.

"I'm sorry." Xie Lanshan suddenly stood up and bowed toward Director Peng, the Taos, and Song Qilian apologetically. He said in a hoarse voice, "There won't be a wedding anymore; there wasn't supposed to be one in the first place."

Xie Lanshan gave everyone a smile; this grin spread across his face and whole body. His heart lifted. He turned around and chased after Shen Liufei without hesitation.

(vi)

Xie Lanshan rushed out of the hotel but was a step too late. The figure of the man had already disappeared and a phone call revealed he had already turned off his phone as well.

Xie Lanshan kept running under the influence and heat of the alcohol. He ran and ran until he was exhausted. Lights from houses shone while the moon peeked out from the layers of clouds; as if the sky had opened its eyes, a silver glow illuminated the ground.

Xie Lanshan panted heavily after his sprinting. His hands were on his knees while he called out desperately:

"Shen Liufei."

Xie Lanshan returned home to see no sign of the man, then rushed to Shen Liufei's old residential unit only to find that a new tenant already occupied the place. Xie Lanshan searched for a whole night like a blind cat, returning to his house only near dawn to crash on his bed.

Solitude and fatigue crawled up his body when he finally lay still in darkness, but he couldn't stop calling Shen Liufei's name. Before the chaos dispersed, before the truth had been revealed, he had always felt a dark and bloody hole in his heart. And Shen Liufei had always been the one strand of hope that he clung to in order to escape his loneliness and fatigue.

That was why he kept crying that name soundlessly and endlessly. He called as his fingers reached toward his crotch, jerking until he came, until the white liquid slowly spread. Again and again, he called out until a single sound managed to come out of

his parched throat. The broken sounds of the name fell into the night, then melted into the boundless darkness until nothing else could escape.

Two days passed without a trace of the man and no calls. Xie Lanshan finally panicked. Thinking that Shen Liufei was determined to leave him for good, he quickly used the last of his professional connections to search for the whereabouts of the artist.

He discovered that the man had left on a plane the night after Tao Longyue's wedding, but instead of going back to the States, he'd flown to Thailand.

Xie Lanshan immediately thought of Tang Xiaomo and figured Shen Liufei must have found some new clues, which served as an explanation for why he had been in such a rush.

Yet regardless of whether that was the truth, he was relieved to know that the man hadn't gone back to America. Xie Lanshan's heart brightened slightly, and he decided to also make a trip to Thailand.

Requesting a vacation would require approval from his boss, but Tao Jun had just recovered and wasn't back at his post. Tao Longyue had just gotten married and it wouldn't be a good time to disturb him right now, but if he tried to send the request to Chief Liu, the process of approving the leave would take forever. Xie Lanshan figured that since he was already suspended from work, he could just leave a note and take off.

While Xie Lanshan was preparing for his own trip, the provincial branch was also preparing to dispatch a rescue team to the same place. The missing person wasn't an official, but he was still a celebrity who needed to be found. The Blue Fox often worked across borders for their antidrug operations, so they were familiar with the local situations in Thailand and Myanmar, and their knowledge and experience in international investigations made them the ideal candidates to take on the mission compared to the other teams in the Chinese public security system.

After Sui Hong was suspended from work, Chi Jin became the temporary commander of the Blue Fox. Director Peng called Chi Jin into his office to hand off the order of rescuing the Chinese national Wen Jue.

To Director Peng's surprise, Chi Jin refused to carry out the order.

"If Captain Sui doesn't return to his post, then I refuse to work as well. You can ask Ling Yun, Tu Lang, or even Melon Cai—I don't care, they can be the new captain of the Blue Foxes if they want to!" He used both full names and nicknames. The frustration of his captain's suspension had clouded his judgment and desperation made him give up on even showing the most basic courtesy before his senior.

"Is that what you really want?" Director Peng said. Chi Jin's attitude had angered him. The older man asked the question again before exploding in rage, "If you're serious with this attitude, then take off that uniform right now. A childish coward like you doesn't deserve to wear this uniform!"

Director Peng was both authoritative and ruthless. Just that single howl from the director left Chi Jin's back covered in cold sweat. The young man realized he had gone overboard but he still refused to yield and shot back, "You can call me childish, but I'm no coward!"

Director Peng answered, "You still haven't settled Hanhai's red-ice case and now you want to quit because you can't solve it? If that's not cowardly to you, then what is?"

Chi Jin was flustered as he explained, "It's not that I'm quitting because we aren't making progress, but the red-ice market in Hanhai suddenly vanished and all the clues disappeared overnight—"

Director Peng scolded him, "Don't give me excuses. If you guys weren't able to find new clues over the last few months, that's a failure of Captain Sui's leadership! I can suspend him for this reason alone right now, don't even mention the mistake he made in the past!"

"They say drug enforcement is a war of attrition during times of peace, and of course, we, as the soldiers on the front lines, need to protect our bases. But not all cases can be settled overnight; don't forget what our ancestors taught us about the importance of resilience and perseverance." Chi Jin couldn't endure anyone criticizing Sui Hong—not even the director himself. He frowned and displayed an almost naïve look of displeasure. "Either way, there's nothing wrong with our captain's leadership. You simply don't understand the struggles of the frontline fighters. That's the only reason you can say such things, but I refuse to step down!"

"Watch your mouth! You little rascal, did you forget your position?" Director Peng held back the urge to laugh and kept a steely face. He held on to the anger in his expression but asked numbly, "I just have one question for you right now: can you settle this case?"

Chi Jin clenched his teeth and said, "I can."

Seeing that this provocation had worked, Director Peng followed up with another question, "So, are you able to settle this international rescue mission as well?"

Chi Jin held a hand to his chest and felt an adrenaline rush as he responded, "Yes, I can."

"Okay, don't forget what you've said today." Director Peng gave the young man a small smile of satisfaction and said, "You may take your leave now."

"But... I also have a request." Chi Jin waited for silent approval to continue from Director Peng and mustered up his courage, then said, "I fight for my country and for my captain. If I can settle both cases, can I request to have my captain back at his post?"

"Are you trying to bargain with me here?" Peng Huaili was also quite puzzled; what made this twenty-something kid think he had the right to bargain with him? But he noticed that there was no hint of jest on the young man's face. The light in his eyes burned like a torch that could heat anyone around him. Peng Huaili stared at Chi Jin

for a while before finally nodding. "I'll give you one month."

"Yes, sir!" Chi Jin grinned and rushed out of the office in excitement.

He returned to the apartment he rented out with Ling Yun. His roommate had already gotten the notice and was packing up for the trip.

"What did the director say? Can our cap come back?" Ling Yun asked hastily the moment he saw Chi Jin return. While Ling Yun wasn't as strongheaded and rash as Chi Jin, Sui Hong's case also weighed on his mind every day.

"We'll need to work harder. If we can drag out the source of the red ice and bring back that celebrity from Thailand in a month, then we get Cap'n back." Of course, neither of the cases were easy. Chi Jin was out of ideas at the moment and tossed his jacket on the sofa. He looked grim as he pondered his options.

His cell phone suddenly rang; he took a peek and saw it was a message from Liu Mingfang.

Chi Jin didn't want to become too close with the man; Chi Jin couldn't explain it exactly, but he simply found him uncomfortable to hang around. Regardless, Liu Mingfang seemed to have a sincere interest in befriending him. He would often talk about how he admired the legendary Blue Fox team and had some friends in the business world who wanted to become acquainted with Chi Jin. Now Liu Mingfang offered to talk about Xie Lanshan—and the fact that it was Xie Lanshan's case that had caused Sui Hong's suspension.

Chi Jin wasn't interested in business elites, but he would run toward anything that had to do with his captain to the point he lost sight of everything else. He responded to the message and stood up. Chi Jin put his jacket back on and left after telling Ling Yun, "Don't wait for me to come back tonight."

They were back at the same bar that was Liu Mingfang's haunt. He stood up and made space for Chi Jin as soon as he saw the young man walk in.

"I'm going to be leaving the country for a mission soon, so spill the beans now," Chi Jin said coldly, reminding the other man that time was golden and to get straight to the point.

Liu Mingfang still had a smile on his face as he pointed at a larger man beside him, saying that this was a friend of his who wanted to open up a business in warehousing services. He explained the friend might run into some trouble with import and export merchandise like the Starex Group had and wanted to have a public security friend to help keep an eye out in case anyone tried to use their trade channels for illegal activities.

This was quite a huge stretch. Despite being frontline crime fighters in law enforcement, public security personnel were still not as well-read in the realms of the law as actual lawyers. It would make more sense to consult a criminal attorney to prevent illegal business activities.

Chi Jin suppressed his frustration and answered a few questions for the friend, but he was growing tired after not hearing Liu Mingfang even mention Xie Lanshan's

name and was ready to leave.

The businessman knew how to negotiate and called two ladies over, saying that they should have a little fun before taking off.

Two young and beautiful women stepped out from the crowd of hostesses; Chi Jin first shot them an annoyed glance before suddenly feeling a chill go down his spine. He saw a young lady among the women wearing a crop top that exposed a black tattoo on her belly.

Two letters were emblazoned on her stomach like poison ivy: MK.

He recalled that Xie Lanshan had once mentioned Mu Kun had a particular interest: the drug lord liked to tattoo his name on his lovers. The design of these letters on her body was identical to the ones found on Lang Li. The information on this tattoo hadn't been made public; he had only told Liu Yanbo during a meeting and hoped that Hanhai City's violent crimes unit could find a new direction to investigate after all other leads had disappeared.

The surprise came so suddenly, Chi Jin quickly changed his attitude, reached a hand over to the businessman, and began acting friendlier than before.

"Can I get a different girl?" He squinted his eyes as if he wasn't interested, then pointed at the young woman in a crop top. "This one looks better."

For the next two days, Chi Jin spent his free time with Liu Mingfang and their newly acquainted young female friends at the bar—all for the sake of tracing the one clue he could find to settle the case. He knew Sui Hong too well; the man's career wasn't just one of life's burdens for his captain—it was a love and passion.

Chi Jin grew anxious as he considered this and picked some intel from the young woman, hoping to meet her boss as well.

Her expression grew uneasy as she nuzzled close to Chi Jin and laughed. "Don't try and make me talk! I know you're a cop. You're trying to frame me."

"There are different types of cops out there. All those strict, traditional ones are happy living in poverty, but I'm not stupid." Chi Jin bore through the strong scent of her perfume and wrapped an arm around the young woman's soft shoulders. He lowered his head and seductively whispered into her ear, "Besides, we're already so close. Are you saying you still can't trust me?"

After another passionate and intimate embrace, the young woman grew more flustered. As if she couldn't help but give in to the request of the young and handsome man before her, she finally said, "I can introduce you guys, but only people who are one of us can join our little circle. So, do you want to prove it?"

Chi Jin held up her hand and playfully bit her finger as he asked, "How do I do that?"

The young woman giggled as if she was ticklish, then said, "That's enough." She suddenly pulled out a small bag of what looked like amethyst from her purse. The object inside glowed enticingly and dangerously under the dimmed lights of the bar.

She leaned her face toward Chi Jin. Her sweet breath drew out through her red lips as she said, “Want to try some of this?”

Stowaway

Tang Xiaomo's photo also captured the face of a man behind her, but because of the distance and the glass door of the cafe obscuring him, his features were difficult to make out. Shen Liufei asked a flight attendant for a cup of coffee and a pencil. He slowly gathered his focus and began drawing on paper. Before the coffee cooled and the plane landed, he had successfully traced out a figure of the man.

The man had straight eyebrows, large eyes, and a slim face—one that was handsome and reserved. This kind of man could easily draw in the opposite sex even if he was dangerous, like a carnivore that oozed with sweetness to lure in its unsuspecting prey.

Shen Liufei knew where his next stop was as soon as he left the airport and rushed right to the coffee shop where Tang Xiaomo had taken her selfie.

He had already assumed that Tang Xiaomo was involved in a kidnapping case. Because of his mother's case, he had once kept a very close eye on female kidnappings. Among the files he had investigated, almost every single one noted Thailand was a highly dangerous place for women to travel alone. This paradise of beautiful scenery was also the largest market for human trafficking in Southeast Asia. Many victims were tourist kidnapped during their trip to the country or stowaways who made a stop within its borders. A young and beautiful lone traveler like Tang Xiaomo would be a popular target.

Geographically, the coffee shop was located right near a popular tourist hotspot. If the man in the photo was a known offender, he would likely hang around the same area to prey on others.

Many Chinese immigrants were near the tourist district, so Shen Liufei took the portrait he had drawn and asked the owner of the coffee shop, "Have you seen this man before?"

As he handed the art over, Xie Lanshan's bullet necklace that was still wrapped around his wrist dropped out from his sleeve. Shen Liufei's hand froze for a moment while a gentle breeze blew by, jabbing right into his heart.

He stared at the necklace and suddenly recalled a poem:

Even if tomorrow's dawn will be gun points and a bloody sun... I swear to not give up this night; you, I swear never to abandon.

Poems from the north were notoriously maudlin, but this one was too romanticized. No one could remain entirely calm in the face of a bloody death. Shen Liufei had thought about being a little selfish and keeping the man beside him—even if it might

be a betrayal to his mother—but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Love had been born out of the void, one that was inexplicable and deep, yet he couldn't trust his own selfishness even at a time like this.

The owner responded with something, but he didn't catch it.

"Sir? Sir?" the owner called out.

"I'm sorry." Shen Liufei gave a slight apologetic bow for his sudden daze.

The owner gave him a smile and told him the man's name was Anuchit. He was a very kind local chemistry teacher who often visited the area.

Now that he knew the man's name and occupation, it wouldn't be difficult to find his address. Shen Liufei recalled he had never been to Thailand but felt a strange familiarity in this city.

The place Anuchit lived wasn't very safe to walk around, and by the time he made his way to the residence, night had already fallen. Shen Liufei strolled casually on the streets and saw a person run toward him.

It was a man dressed in a gray trench coat; his sharp, triangular physique was noticeable even at a distance. He seemed to be about the same height as Shen Liufei but much more muscular. The man buried his head in his trench coat, his collar popped high as if he was intentionally hiding his face. He even leaned to the side slightly and lifted his left hand up to cover his face as he passed Shen Liufei. His right hand pressed into his hip.

This instinctive motion caught Shen Liufei's brief attention; he noticed the man was wearing a pair of clean black leather boots, the same type that the Thai police often wore.

The strange motion earlier suddenly had an explanation. Thai police officers often wore tight uniforms and wore their belts hanging below their waist. All of their guns, communication devices, and tools hung on their belt, so the police would often subconsciously keep a hand on them at all times.

A police siren suddenly blared, and the man rushed forward. He avoided the direction where the police cars arrived and disappeared into a small alleyway.

Shen Liufei arrived at Anuchit's residence only to discover that the police had already surrounded the building. According to the crowd of pedestrians, a chemistry teacher had just been discovered stabbed to death in his own home.

As a foreigner who was also investigating Anuchit, Shen Liufei recognized that he might become a suspect if he tried to enter now. He turned and left while the police discussed the case, settling in at a small hotel in the nearby Chinatown.

Now that he knew the man in the trench coat earlier was a policeman, he could pay a visit to the police department the next day and find new clues.

The hotel room was hot and humid with very thin walls. Shen Liufei lay on the bed and stared at the cracks and uneven paint on the walls, pondering Tang Xiaomo's whereabouts until he was inevitably reminded of Xie Lanshan.

The two's relationship was both insipid and passionate. When they were apart, they knew the other had work to take care of, but once everything was settled and they were back together, they could spend a whole day in bed together without tiring of each other. Shen Liufei was used to keeping a distance from everyone and everything as if mortal matters were of no interest to him. Yet when he finally found time to let his mind run free, he would discover that all of his memories were filled with suffering and pain.

The lights were off, so only shades of red ambiance passed through the windows and colored the room a seductive crimson. Korean and Hakkanese passed through the thin walls, yet despite not understanding a word of the conversations, the sounds were strangely familiar.

The desire to find an old friend in a foreign land weighed heavily on his heart and made him feel exhausted. He turned and played with the bullet necklace on his wrist in the dark and closed his eyes.

Xie Lanshan arrived at Bangkok two days after Shen Liufei arrived. He figured that if Tang Xiaomo disappeared in Bangkok, Shen Liufei would follow her to investigate her disappearance. The two may have temporarily lost contact with each other, but their goal was the same.

Xie Lanshan had befriended a Thai policeman during his years undercover in the Golden Triangle. The old cop's name was Somsak and he knew that Xie Lanshan was an undercover officer from China. He was very cooperative and kept Xie Lanshan's identity a secret, and even helped him on some onerous tasks during his undercover mission. The two men had formed a lasting friendship over their careers and shared goals. Xie Lanshan heard Somsak was transferred to Bangkok and immediately thought that this old friend could help him find the missing Tang Xiaomo.

The two exchanged a passionate hug as soon as the door opened and they skipped all the small talk to chat like old friends.

Old man Somsak was a typical pure-blooded Thai man. He wasn't particularly pretty, but very amicable. His skin was a shade darker than Xie Lanshan and his full lips formed into a friendly smile. The man wasn't tall but was very fit. White hair grew from his sideburns, but his strong spirit as a cop remained youthful. His Chinese was quite good, and he called Xie Lanshan "a-Lan" as well.

The old cop was ready to retire, not expecting to run into another murder case right as he was able to leave his post. He half-joked around with Xie Lanshan about having a condition to helping with the search for the missing little girl—that Xie Lanshan needed to help him solve his own murder case first.

Xie Lanshan thought about it briefly and decided that it was a fair trade. However, a foreign cop had no authority in Thailand, and he was still on suspension at home. He lifted an eyebrow and gave Somsak a playful grin. "I'm cool with that, but I don't want to drag an old cop who's about to retire to break the rules at the last minute."

“Don’t worry about it,” Somsak laughed. “We’ve already gotten news from the higher-ups that we’re set to work with the police from your place in a cross-border operation for a case to bring back a big celebrity too.”

A cross-border operation might sound like a piece of cake, but it wasn’t easy to execute. Everything from the exact jurisdiction to the authority each side had was something that needed to be settled. However, the initial negotiation had confirmed that the Handong Provincial Public Security Branch would send in two special agents from the Blue Fox Commando to help negotiate the case of Chinese celebrity Wen Jue in Thailand.

Now that he was reminded of it, Somsak was surprised and asked Xie Lanshan, “Aren’t you part of the Blue Fox too? How come you arrived earlier than expected?”

“I’m no longer part of it.” It had been almost three years since he’d left the Blue Foxes, and the entire story behind it all was quite complicated to explain. Xie Lanshan’s expression darkened slightly before he sighed and said, “It’s a long story, but I’m also not here for that celebrity. I’m here to find a friend.”

Somsak didn’t understand the sourness and bitterness in that small sigh and only nodded in response. “Staying out of drug enforcement is good too. Those days in the past... were too hard for you.”

Xie Lanshan didn’t want to talk about the past. Instead, he gave the old man another sweet smile. “So tell me about this murder case of yours.”

“The victim is an adult man named Anuchit. Thirty-eight, and single. He was a chemistry teacher at an international school here. The school’s quite prestigious, you could say it’s the best in Bangkok.” Somsak walked back toward his desk as he explained and pulled out some photos from the file folder for Xie Lanshan. He had been pondering over this case right before Xie Lanshan came knocking on his door.

Xie Lanshan looked at the photo; Anuchit was a clean and handsome man. His face was on the long side. His eyes were large and complemented by strong eyebrows. It was almost difficult to tell he was nearing his forties, and he rather looked quite like a celebrity.

The neighborhood he lived in wasn’t the safest area, and there were no surveillance cameras around. The time of his death was around 9 P.M. two days prior and the crime was reported within twenty minutes of his death. A neighbor noticed that the man’s door wasn’t closed and wanted to remind the man, but as they walked in, the witness discovered the victim was already dead.

“Isn’t this neighbor a little too friendly?” Xie Lanshan felt suspicion out of instinct.

“Anuchit mentioned he wanted to move because he felt his life was being threatened,” the old cop said. “And he was right.”

“Anything else?” Xie Lanshan asked.

“We don’t have any more information. The neighbor said the victim was quite vague.”

Xie Lanshan looked at the photos of the crime scene. The victim had died from a heavy blow on the back of his head from his own ashtray, which had shattered his skull; the culprit had hit him twice.

“The neighbor also said that they heard the victim open the doors to greet a guest at around 8:30 P.M. that night. They couldn’t make out the features of the guest but can confirm it was a man.”

That meant the victim and culprit were acquainted. Xie Lanshan nodded and continued to flip through the photos. He noticed that one was of a wall in the victim’s home that was normally covered by a piece of white cloth. Behind the cloth was a wall covered by various photos of young women. The photos looked to be candid shots taken in secret.

A demon hid beneath human skin. Xie Lanshan frowned and pulled out this photo, commenting, “You said the victim was a well-respected chemistry teacher, but it sure looks like he’s got a hidden side that nobody was aware of.”

“This is also one of the reasons why I thought about pulling you into this case when I heard you were looking for a missing female friend.” Somsak let out a sigh as he took the photo and said, “Based on my years of experience as a cop, I’m almost certain this guy’s a human trafficker.”

Gambling was banned in Thailand, but pornography was a robust business. Young women who fell into the hands of human traffickers were unlikely to be saved. Xie Lanshan turned toward Somsak, his gaze cold as he pressed his eyebrows together even more and waited for the old cop to continue.

“We’ve been very hard on fighting drugs lately. Many of those old opium farms have now been transformed to grow tea leaves. The business is actually doing quite well too. Drugs like heroin don’t have as big of a market as before, so most of the mafia and criminals shifted their focus to human trafficking. You can only sell drugs once, but people can keep exchanging hands.” The old cop lowered his head and let out another sigh.

“Mafia?” Xie Lanshan pondered a little before asking with a heavy expression, “Do you mean Guan Nuoqin?”

“That’s the man.” Somsak nodded and said, “And after some investigation with the bank, we’ve found that this Anuchit person has been making massive transactions lately.”

Xie Lanshan fell silent and continued flipping through the photos. One quickly caught his attention.

Anuchit’s house didn’t have an entryway like how traditional Chinese houses were built, and the layout of the interior was visibly different from most traditional family homes; it was difficult to tell if it was intentional. Regardless, the first item one would see upon entering the house was a large antique carved cabinet. The detailed sculptures on the cabinet complemented an elegant old clock that also hung right above it, but on top of the cabinet was a wooden toy that resembled a child’s abacus,

which contrasted with the decorations in the rest of the house.

There were six wooden sticks on the toy abacus, each one sporting ten beads that ranged in color from red, black, yellow, green, blue, and purple.

Xie Lanshan noticed that there were two even holes on the top of the toy, which meant that someone must have removed the seventh stick.

The beads had been moved to form a series of numbers: 679234.

(ii)

With the patience of Job, Shen Liufei waited for about two days near the police station before he finally saw the man that he'd run into the night of the murder. Even if the man now wore a uniform, his physique and mannerisms gave his identity away to the perceptive artist.

The man was tall and well-built, had tanned skin and black hair, and donned a messy hairstyle that shined like horsehair. Faint stubble above his lips gave him a wild look that overshadowed his rather good-looking face. The man had a wide face, which highlighted his big eyes that were clear as water.

Shen Liufei purchased a knife at a local shop for self-defense and found out from the owner in English that the cop's name was Kang Xin. He was of Chinese descent.

Kang Xin didn't go back home after leaving the station and instead stopped by a bar on his own. Shen Liufei tailed the man and entered the same establishment.

The man ordered a drink but didn't take a sip, looking anxiously at his watch like he was waiting for someone. Shen Liufei assumed that the man had an important appointment, so he didn't startle the snake, instead opting to sit quietly in the corner to observe.

About half an hour later, Kang Xin received a call. He seemed very nervous and murmured into the phone with his hand over his mouth. Then he stood up abruptly and left the bar in haste.

Shen Liufei stood up and followed the man, snaking through the city streets carefully but swiftly.

The man was indeed an experienced cop with a sharp eye and knew how to shake off a tail. Shen Liufei stood out too much with his pale skin and handsome appearance. The cop noticed someone was trailing him and walked faster, then turned into a small alleyway.

Shen Liufei also made his way into the alley, but the man had already disappeared into the dark and narrow street. The artist only found junk on either side of the street, and a foul smell that loomed in the air.

Above his head was a crescent moon, which was the only source of light on this seemingly never-ending narrow road. Every corner seemed to have a hiding spot.

Shen Liufei walked slowly into the alley. His eyebrows pressed slightly together, lips closed as his gaze remained fixed on the road ahead. His ink-black eyes scanned

left to right with every step forward.

His eyesight and hearing were both very sensitive, but the person hiding in the dark right now was holding his breath. It was deathly silent; even the sound of a needle dropping to the ground would have been heard.

Shen Liufei walked about two-thirds of the way into the alleyway. He didn't notice that a little crossbow peeked out from behind a broken shelf and was aimed at him.

Kang Xin recognized that his prey was under the light and squinted his eyes as he locked on his target, waiting until the man walked past to shoot an arrow right into his head.

A spark of light seemed to appear in the air as the arrow shot from the bow. To Kang Xin's surprise, Shen Liufei noticed something was up right at that moment and swiftly dodged the attack. Just before the arrow hit the ground, Shen Liufei kicked the area to the side of him and knocked down the shelf.

The items on the shelf rained down on Kang Xin, who quickly jumped out to avoid impact. He utilized his height and thrust the small crossbow in his hand at Shen Liufei.

The artist didn't waste time and greeted the man with a fist. He moved swiftly like lightning, dexterously blocking all attacks while making aggressive advances against the cop. To his surprise, the tall man didn't dodge and took a heavy blow right to his chest. This impact sent the tall man back half a meter, proving that Shen Liufei was an experienced fighter.

Kang Xin was also quite skilled in martial arts and pushed Shen Liufei back with aggressive counterattacks. The two men engaged in a violent brawl for a while, until Shen Liufei took the upper hand and pinned the man down beneath him. He said, "I'm not here for you, I'm looking for Anuchit. I know he's a human trafficker—he kidnapped one of my friends."

Kang Xin pretended to surrender and responded in Chinese that he wouldn't be fighting back, then suddenly pulled himself up and fought back more aggressively.

Shen Liufei was knocked onto the ground as if he had just been run over by a bull. The two men fought on the ground until Shen Liufei once again dominated him. This time, he held out the knife in his pocket and pressed the blade against the man's neck, saying in a hoarse voice, "I could be a colleague of yours in China, I can tell the police that I've witnessed you at the scene of the crime that night and get you in trouble. Or, I can ask you one simple question—I'm here for my friend. I couldn't care less if you were the one who killed that scum or not! Do you understand?"

The blade pressed into the man's throat and cut a crimson mark. Shen Liufei addressed him sternly, "Answer me, do you understand?"

"I... I understand..." Kang Xin no longer struggled and gave in.

Shen Liufei noticed a locket necklace draped around the man's neck. He pulled the silver necklace off with the tip of his knife and looked inside to see that it was a photo of a little girl. She bore a resemblance to the man. Her eyes were bright and she had a

wide face. She was a very pretty little girl.

This was likely his daughter.

Kang Xin grew anxious and rushed to grab the necklace, ignoring the blade. He called out, "Give it back!"

"Sorry." Shen Liufei didn't jest and returned the necklace with care and sincerity. He knew very well how people could be trapped by a specific kind of emotion for the rest of their lives—the necklace was the same as the bracelet around his wrist.

"She's very beautiful." The man was aggressive, like an experienced predator during a fight, but beneath that armor was a courteous gentleman who remained calm in the face of an enemy. Shen Liufei wiped the blood from the corner of his lips and asked, "Is this your daughter?"

Kang Xin had suffered quite a blow; his face was purple and blue from his bruised cheekbone and there was a little bump on his face. He sat on the ground, fatigued, head hanging as he stared down at his necklace and gently caressed the photo of the girl. He said, "Her name's Poonaya, I call her Yaya. She's my little princess and she just turned ten this year."

Shen Liufei noticed the bitterness and pain in the man's eyes as he looked at his daughter's photo. The artist paused slightly before asking, almost reluctantly, "Is your daughter..."

"Oh, no." Kang Xin shook his head after realizing what the other man was about to ask and said, "She wasn't kidnapped. She lives with her mother right now. She... She's sick."

"Is it severe?"

"Very." Kang Xin frowned in pain, his lips pressed together tightly. He then explained, "Dilated cardiomyopathy. The only cure is a heart transplant, but we couldn't find any donors that match. The doctor said that if we don't do the transplant soon, she'll... I wish I could just give my heart to her."

A moment of silence fell between the two. The dark alleyway was long and narrow, the entrance like a tiny dot of light. A pedestrian passed by the entrance and saw two men sitting alone in the dark, then immediately assuming it was some inappropriate business, spat on the ground in disgust.

After a long while, Kang Xin shook his head and said, "Whether you believe me or not, I didn't kill the man."

"So what were you doing there at a time like that?" Shen Liufei didn't suspect the man, who seemed to have gotten enough rest. He held a hand out to pull the man back on his feet.

"I did intend to kill him." Kang Xin was impressed by the young man's class and admitted, "But he was dead by the time I arrived at his place."

"Why did you want to kill him?"

"I can't tell you." Kang Xin lowered his head again to give one last look at his daughter's photo before putting the necklace back into his pocket, then turned around

to leave.

Shen Liufei didn't stop him and only said airily, "Officer Kang Xin."

The man refused to turn his head but stopped walking.

"My friend is also a young girl, and also a daughter to her father. He'll be worried for her safety like you are concerned for your daughter's health." Tang Xiaomo lived with her grandfather since she was young and had never brought up her parents; he recalled she glossed over them briefly and said she was abandoned, but Shen Liufei knew this was the only way to open up the man's kindheartedness.

He could tell that the man was a cop and that his sense of justice had not wavered because of his earlier confession.

After a brief pause, Shen Liufei continued, "I can't and don't exercise any official authority in your country. I simply wish to know my friend's whereabouts so that I can bring her back to her father."

The man's shoulders shivered slightly, as if his last bit of reluctance had finally deflated and vanished. He turned his head slightly and said, "I don't know where your friend is, but I know that the local stowaway organization here is planning a big human-trafficking trade soon. Among them are some other stowaways and tourists who were kidnapped or sold off; if you can handle it, I can help make an opening for you to get inside."

(iii)

Looking at photos was not enough to solve a crime. Somsak was confident in Xie Lanshan's abilities and used his connections to create an opening for him to check the locked crime scene in person.

Xie Lanshan searched the house carefully without skipping over any details, ensuring that nothing escaped his eyes.

He soon noticed that the cabinet from the photo was supposed to be against the wall inside a room and not facing the front door. The collected dust gave away the original location of the cabinet. Judging from the slight marks left from dragging the furniture over, the layout was not the homeowner's personal preference and had been changed recently with a purpose.

"If the victim doesn't die immediately in a murder case, they will usually leave a dying message that points directly to the identity of the culprit. But this message may not have been left on the day of the murder." Xie Lanshan squatted down beside the cabinet to investigate as he explained to Somsak behind him, "Judging by the witness account from the neighbor, Anuchit may have changed the layout of the furniture in his house after realizing his life was in danger to ensure that he could leave an obvious dying message if he was killed."

Almost as soon as he finished the last line, he discovered something. There was a small object beneath the cabinet; Xie Lanshan leaned forward and reached for the

item, pulling out a wooden bead with his vinyl glove. The bead was painted white and was a little larger than his thumb, with two even holes on both sides.

After checking there was nothing else beneath the cabinet, Xie Lanshan stood up and handed the white bead to Somsak.

The crime scene was left untouched, so the toy abacus still rested on top of the cabinet. Somsak compared the white bead in his hand with the beads on the abacus and confirmed that it was a bead from the missing seventh abacus stick.

He asked Xie Lanshan, "But what does this mean?"

Of course, Xie Lanshan didn't have an answer yet and silently licked the corner of his lips like a soon-to-be-hungry leopard.

"Six digits... could it be some sort of passcode for a safe?" Somsak shook his head almost as soon as he asked and said with a sigh, "We've searched Anuchit's room thoroughly and couldn't find anything that needed a passcode. They tried his phone and computer to no avail, and they didn't find a safe at his bank. All the clues lead to dead ends."

Xie Lanshan pondered slightly before saying, "The police can access computers, phones, and safes even without a passcode. There's no need for him to leave this kind of message."

It didn't make sense to leave this kind of a dying message from an analytical point of view. Somsak nodded and asked, "True, but what do these six numbers mean then?"

"679234... 679234..." Xie Lanshan circled around the room as he mumbled the numbers. Suddenly, he lifted his head and looked at the antique clock hanging above the wooden cabinet.

He frowned and asked Somsak, "What time is it right now?"

Somsak responded, "2:40 P.M., what's wrong?"

Xie Lanshan lifted his chin and shot a glance toward the clock and said, "Look."

The time on the clock was frozen at 1:47 A.M., which meant that it was possible someone had purposefully stopped the clock.

"1:47 A.M... 147... 147..." Xie Lanshan placed a hand on his chin as he mumbled. Then, his eyebrows relaxed, as if the mist before his eyes suddenly cleared. His eyes lit up brighter and brighter.

"A toy abacus with only seven wooden sticks isn't enough to display a nine-digit number but also too much to display a six-digit. That's why Anuchit took one stick off at the last minute. The beads that dropped to the ground are proof." Xie Lanshan confidently smiled and grew more certain of his analysis. He turned and said to Somsak, "This isn't a six-digit passcode, it's a nine-digit final message."

Somsak couldn't catch up to the logic and asked, "But it's 147679234, what do the extra three digits mean?"

Xie Lanshan didn't respond and instead walked up toward the cabinet in excitement. He leaned down to use it as a table and reached a hand back to ask, "Do

you have a pen and paper?”

Somsak pulled out the items from his pocket and handed them to him.

“You said Anuchit was a chemistry teacher, so let’s try looking at this using the periodic table of elements.” Xie Lanshan wrote nine numbers on the paper and was quickly able to separate the digits into logical number sets. He drew lines between the digits and explained, “14 is silicon, the symbol is Si. 7 is nitrogen, which is N, 67 is... 67...”

Xie Lanshan didn’t even think about searching the internet and instead pressed his fingers on his forehead a few times, attempting to recall from his memories. After a moment, he remembered—or perhaps it was more accurate to say that the fragment of memory left in his head remembered.

“67 is holmium, HO. 92 is uranium, U, and 34 is selenium, which is Se... if we combine the letters it becomes...” Xie Lanshan wrote something on the paper and then held it up to Somsak behind him.

SIN HOUSE.

“This—this is...” Somsak recognized the words written on the paper. “It’s the name of a pole-dancing club on the bar street around here!”

Another person walked into Anuchit’s house just as they deciphered the message. The footsteps were heavy, like a muffled drum on the ground.

A tall and fit man donning a police uniform had stepped in. His eyes stood out the most. They were big and bright, which contrasted with his physical age.

Somsak introduced the newcomer to Xie Lanshan. He pointed at the tall man and said with a smile, “This is my buddy, Officer Kang Xin. He’s a Chinese immigrant and taught me most of my Mandarin. I guess you can call him my teacher.” He then turned and introduced Xie Lanshan to Kang Xin, saying that the former was a cop from China that he’d become acquainted with through a drug enforcement operation. He then praised Xie Lanshan’s abilities as an investigator, also mentioning that Xie Lanshan was the kindest and most benevolent cop he’d ever met. Sometimes the young man didn’t even seem like a cop and was instead like an immensely compassionate buddha.

This was the highest praise a man could receive from a Buddhist follower. Somsak had already spoken very good Chinese eight to nine years ago when Xie Lanshan was still undercover, so his introduction on both sides was very humble but exaggerated. Xie Lanshan turned toward the cop and lifted an eyebrow, then asked nonchalantly, “Officer Kang, what’s with the injury on your face?”

A hint of unease flashed across Kang Xin’s face as he reached a hand up to touch the bruise on his cheek. He explained, “I was catching a thief on the street and ended up letting them get away. I underestimated them and screwed up.”

“That’s one powerful fighter!” Somsak was surprised and said, “You’re one of the best fighters we have in the bureau.”

“Not a chance, we just exchanged a few fists,” Kang Xin waved his hand and then quickly averted his gaze as soon as he met Xie Lanshan’s.

His sharp sixth sense as a cop signaled to Xie Lanshan that the man was hiding something, but he couldn’t place his finger on what. He simply studied the unease on the man’s face and asked with a small smile, “Officer Kang, do you have anything to add to the case since you arrived late?”

“Kang Xin’s daughter is very sick. She’s at the terminal stage of her illness, so he sometimes requests time off. The higher-ups have all been very understanding of this,” Somsak explained. “He wasn’t involved very much in this case, but Kang here is a good cop, just like you. I don’t know if you’ve seen the news before about a man who barged into the police department with a knife. He was extremely agitated, but even though it was within the bounds of the law to shoot the man, one officer chose to walk up to the invader and hugged him instead.”

“I heard about it.” Xie Lanshan knew of the case due to its unique circumstances. It even sparked a debate among the violent crimes unit once. Regardless of whether the officer had taken the most appropriate action, the police were able to relocate the agitated man in the end and saved lives that could have been in danger.

Kang Xin lowered his head in embarrassment before the old cop could continue. He wasn’t being humble out of courtesy; he simply believed the incident wasn’t worth mentioning. He said, “That’s from a long time ago, no need to bring it up again.”

Even without Somsak’s explanation, Xie Lanshan also realized that his reaction had been a little rash. Without Shen Liufei around, it was as if he was balancing on a wire. He suspected anyone who walked near him. He suppressed the feelings welling up within him and offered his hand to Kang Xin, introducing himself properly this time, “Xie Lanshan, officer from Hanhai, China.”

Kang Xin smiled and held his hand in response. “Kang Xin, officer from Bangkok, Thailand.”

Bangkok had a much hotter climate with longer daylight; even at 4 P.M., the sky was still crystal clear and blue across the horizon. Single cars worked their way through the streets one by one in this place that looked like paradise on earth while pedestrians swarmed the city like a flood. Xie Lanshan got in Somsak’s car and followed the officers back to the bureau. During the congested trip back, his eyes were fixed on the people outside, hoping to find the person he had been searching for.

A figure briefly swept by into the distance like a fleeting image. The silhouette was solitary and tall and looked very much like Shen Liufei.

In the span of another blink, the figure vanished into the crowd of strange faces. Xie Lanshan almost hit his head on the car’s roof from surprise but quickly sat back down in silence.

It must have been someone else.

As he considered the possibility of never searching for that person again, he turned his gaze back to the people outside. Men, women, young and old; the more people

there were, the more he feared loneliness. The surrounding air suddenly felt chilly, and this coldness seeped into his skin through to his bones until it froze his blood and numbed his limbs. Xie Lanshan leaned by the window and held his shoulders. He gave himself warmth with his own hands, but it wasn't enough.

"Cuz, I miss you so much," he mumbled softly.

As soon as he walked into the bureau, Xie Lanshan was greeted by the shock of encountering another man who shared the same face as Kang Xin.

From Somsak's introduction, this was the branch chief of their bureau and Kang Xin's twin brother, Kang Tai.

The brothers looked almost identical at first glance, but after careful assessment, it wasn't difficult to tell the twins apart by their expressions and body language. Kang Xin was fit and tall. His expression seemed strangely melancholy and even a little run-down, but Kang Tai was different. He was thinner in physique and donned a clean, slicked-back hairstyle that made his entire head seem as though it was covered in a layer of oil. His face even appeared as though it had its own layer of foundation. A strong, fragrant scent assaulted Xie Lanshan's nose even when they were meters apart.

The brothers didn't seem to be close judging by their interaction. The branch chief seemed to not care for his younger brother and simply glanced at Xie Lanshan before standing up and asking Somsak, "Who's this man?"

Somsak introduced Officer Xie Lanshan from China, a former Blue Fox team member. Since the two countries were now cooperating in an operation, he decided he could have Xie Lanshan assist in investigating Anuchit's case.

"Why send two teams at different times? You think these Chinese cops can help investigate our case?" Kang Tai pulled out a silk handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat on his nose. He said, snarling in frustration to the side, "The Blue Fox should be arriving soon. Prepare yourselves and don't embarrass me in front of these foreigners."

(iv)

That night, Xie Lanshan followed Somsak to Sin House.

This famous pole-dancing club belonged to a rich businessman by the name of Zhong Zhuohai. The man was a Chinese immigrant in Thailand and an honorable representative of the Chinese diaspora around the region. His corporation and group were among the top ten businesses in Thailand, with companies distributed all over the continent of Asia. Zhong Zhuohai was already at the grand age of seventy and suffered from a long-time heart condition, according to the media.

Outside Sin House stood six large and wide-shouldered male security guards—three on each side of the door. Their sharp eyes studied every guest who entered or exited, scrutinizing whether each person might bring unwanted trouble. Xie Lanshan

walked past the guards and felt the gazes on him were nowhere near friendly. As he pondered, an upbeat and catchy rhythm rang out through the crowd. He looked past the wave of people and saw a fancy stage at the center.

Beautiful women dressed in seductive outfits on the stage were blowing kisses to the audience. They scanned the club and gestured coquettishly toward the men in the audience, who took all sorts of hints from their gazes.

One woman had a sharp eye and locked onto the most handsome man in the club. She gave Xie Lanshan a smile and began moving her body in a passionately seductive and bold dance. Xie Lanshan lifted the corner of his lips and pulled open his button-up shirt to expose his silky smooth chest. He was ready to throw himself into the dance pool.

Somsak grabbed Xie Lanshan's arm and sternly reminded the man, "You're here for work."

Xie Lanshan smoothly pulled his arm out of Somsak's grip like a snake and said with a grin, "Let me have some fun first."

Xie Lanshan had originally wanted to let himself be free and join in on the culture of the establishment. Anuchit had left a final message that implicated this bar, which meant that the culprit must not have been an ordinary customer. The club was big and crowded, so it would be difficult to pick out one person from the massive congregation. He wanted to get close to one of the dancers so he could use their connections to search for the target.

Yet as soon as he stepped into the dance pool, Xie Lanshan felt a sudden sense of familiarity and ease. He was a man who had no hobbies outside of his job as an officer; in the past, the most he would do was carve little wooden animals for the girl he liked, but now he wanted to make himself happy—and he knew how to do that.

The man was handsome, and his sharp dance moves easily made him the center of attention. All the dancers on stage moved around him as if they were gluing themselves on him. The men down below also followed him with their eyes. Some looked visibly envious, while others showed a hint of interest toward him.

The Xie Lanshan on stage stood out in the club to both the handsome men and beautiful women. His hair was long and draped down his neck, giving his clean features an even more attractive layer that lent him a hint of androgyny. He didn't shy away from dancing with the pretty ladies on stage; the women also welcomed him with open arms—literally. Their hands slid inside his open shirt, hoping to feel his muscular abs.

Then, he stood on the stage and turned his back to the crowd and fell backward. The audience quickly rushed forward with their arms out and caught the man.

Old Somsak finally couldn't stand the scene and made his way into the crowd. He walked beside Xie Lanshan and asked him in a low growl, "Just what are you doing?"

"Can't you see?" Xie Lanshan said with that same attractive smile and called with his arms out, "I'm a party queen!"

The entire club cheered him on, and tension filled the whole establishment.

Somsak angrily pulled Xie Lanshan's arm despite the crowd's booing and dragged Xie Lanshan over to the side.

"I'm helping you solve the case, and that's how you treat me?" Xie Lanshan gave an almost smug response. "You've had 'I'm a cop' written all over your face since you walked into the bar. Trust me, if you carry a sign like that, you'll never be able to get to the bottom of this case."

While there was truth in those words, Somsak couldn't understand the craziness Xie Lanshan had displayed earlier and said numbly, "Well, I *am* a cop. What about you—are you still one?"

Those words would expose their identities if anyone were to overhear them. Xie Lanshan took a glass of wine from a passing waiter and walked out of the bar to calm himself down and get a fresh breath of air.

Something else caught his attention as soon as he walked out. At the front door of a neighboring bar to Sin House, a portly middle-aged man was being kicked out by security guards. He was wearing only his underwear, leaving the thick white skin of his body exposed.

The middle-aged man cried loudly while holding a sign in his hands. Xie Lanshan paid him a little more attention because the man spoke in Chinese. Then he finally realized the funny-looking middle-aged man was a celebrity manager who often appeared on television back home.

What was his name again? Xie Lanshan thought briefly. *Oh, Han Guangming.*

He then glanced at the sign Han Guangming held and almost laughed; it had two English sentences that read "Kidnap me" and "Give my boy back."

Now that he recalled it, human traffickers had also kidnapped the young celebrity Wen Jue in Thailand. The main reason the Blue Foxes were being dispatched was to bring back the lost kid. Xie Lanshan had seen photos of Wen Jue on the internet before. He was only in his early twenties but had a very delicate, model-like face. Unfortunately, it was too average even for a model and wasn't too memorable.

"Take me away!" Han Guangming seemed to be putting on a comedic skit. Like a fat white goose who didn't know when to stop, he held up the sign and called out in front of all the bars around, "Give my Wen Jue back! Take me instead!"

A crowd of young and old women surrounded him to snap photos on their phones, giggling as they passed. Perhaps a few Chinese tourists recognized him and decided that this was even more interesting than simply taking a stroll through the red-light district.

Xie Lanshan quickly analyzed the situation at hand. Bangkok was filled with all sorts of clubs and bars and a bounty of streets dedicated to the red-light district. Among them were human-trafficking hubs that were hard to detect by tourists. But if Han Guangming was able to find his way here, it meant that he at least had some ideas about where to search for the underground trade routes.

However, there was one thing Xie Lanshan couldn't fathom: Only females would usually be sold to red-light districts while men were more often sold to become slaves or engage in organ trades. Han Guangming may have been looking in the wrong place for Wen Jue.

"What are you all taking pictures for? Huh? I'm suing anyone who posts on Weibo for invasion of privacy!" Han Guangming shooed the crowd away with his signboard and called out once again, perhaps putting on the show purposefully to garner more attention, "Take me away! Take me—"

This area was a hotspot for Chinese tourists, so most waiters and guards in the bars spoke Chinese as well. A tall white man dressed as a bodyguard walked out of a bar in a fury. He seemed to be frustrated by Han Guangming's ruckus, which was affecting their business. He lifted a fist, ready to punch the middle-aged man.

A single strike knocked the middle-aged man down, but the white bodyguard didn't stop. His veins popped in anger, and with his hand clenched into a hard fist, he seemed determined to beat the old man to death.

"He's gonna kill me! Murderer!" Han Guangming called out to the crowd while covering his bloody nose. "Are you just going to watch a fellow citizen from China die like this?"

The bodyguard kicked and stomped on Han Guangming without pause. Just then, Xie Lanshan darted forward and grabbed the guard's wrist.

Sometimes words weren't needed between two fighters. As their eyes met, the white man immediately realized that this newcomer was not someone he could mess with. He clucked in displeasure and bumped his shoulder into Xie Lanshan's as he walked away in irritation.

"Go back home," Xie Lanshan said coolly as he helped Han Guangming up from the ground. "It's our job as cops to search for missing persons. There's no need for you to risk your life even if it's to bring back your source of income."

Yet Han Guangming did not listen and instead beamed in excitement as soon as he heard fluent Mandarin. He leaned in toward Xie Lanshan and asked, "Oh, Mister Policeman, are you part of the Blue Fox Commando? I heard our government sent the Blue Fox over to save our little Jue, so please take me along with you to find him!"

"You're searching in the wrong place," Xie Lanshan said. The chubby man looked quite silly upon closer inspection. The flesh on his face scrunched like he was both crying and laughing, and the bruises also colored his face purple and green like a child's doodle. Xie Lanshan didn't find hearing a much older man calling him "Mister Policeman" amusing, so he said sternly, "You should go back. Since nobody has contacted you so far for money, that means they really didn't know they'd kidnapped a celebrity. In a case like this, usually young men are sold into slavery."

"This isn't a normal case! You think our li'l Jue is just a small case?" The chubby man jumped instantly as if he'd heard a grave insult from Xie Lanshan's mouth and said, "I've checked an online report on Thailand's human-trafficking market before,

and some pretty young men were forced into prostitution too... what if....”

Han Guangming made a scissor-like gesture with his hands as his face filled with fright. He cried, “What if I’m too late and he was forced to cut off his little buddy! Oh, my poor ol’ Jue!”

“You’re... not wrong...” Xie Lanshan felt a vein on his forehead pop. He rubbed his temples to ease the growing headache and thought, *No wonder even that bodyguard couldn’t help but beat this guy up. If I could, I would do the same right now.*

“Let’s just settle for tonight. Don’t forget that your teammates will be arriving soon.” Even a Thai policeman like Somsak knew the name of the Blue Fox Commando and said to Xie Lanshan, “Go organize all the clues we have so far so you can report to your teammates.”

“They’re not my teammates.” Colorful lights in this busy street shone on Xie Lanshan’s face, turning red one second and white another. The light in his eyes glistened strangely in the colors. He told Somsak coldly, “They’ve abandoned me.”

“You...” Somsak didn’t know what had happened to Xie Lanshan, but noticed the hint of cruelty hidden beneath the young man’s gaze. Of course, the word “cruel” was far removed from the young undercover cop he’d known many years ago. The old cop took a step back and asked, “Are you still Xie Lanshan?”

“I’m here to look for my friend, not to cooperate with the Thai police.” Xie Lanshan didn’t want to answer the old cop’s question and smiled instead. “Here’s an old Chinese saying to learn: those who trudge down different paths will never meet. You can go solve your case with the Blue Foxes you admire, and I...”

He lowered his gaze to look at the still-naked Han Guangming, then picked the man up by the nape of his neck like a chick. Xie Lanshan grinned and said, “I’ll go find my friend with Old Han here... you’re paying for our entire trip, Old Han, you hear me?”

(v)

The new group of slaves needed to be separated into two groups to work on an island for fishermen, but not enough people were available to manage them. Shen Liufei found his way onto the managing team through Kang Xin and became the right-hand to a supervisor.

Kang Xin only said two words before the young man left: *Take care.*

Those words weighed heavily on his shoulders while Shen Liufei made his way over to an unknown destination. He was aware of the dangers and troubles that awaited ahead and gave this newly acquainted Thai cop a small smile. He was soon blindfolded by someone and then led on a truck that drove off to somewhere out in this foreign land. Shen Liufei couldn’t see anything through the black cloth along the way and could only rely on his nose and ears to remember the mysterious route. He

knew he would end up in a place completely cut off from the rest of the world and witness firsthand what hell on earth was like.

The slaves were temporarily locked in an abandoned factory in the rural mountainside. Outside the factory building were a few rusted metal cages that imprisoned the captured young slaves; the youngest ones seemed to be only thirteen or fourteen, while the eldest ones looked to still be in puberty. Bruises and scars from whippings covered their bodies. All of them were thin as paper and on their last breaths. These poor souls helplessly reached out of the cage to beg as soon as they saw anyone walk by.

That was the first impression Shen Liufei had of this place: their eyes were filled with despair and the bloodlike crimson of the setting sun.

About a hundred or so slaves were kept in the place with only three guards holding submachine guns in their hands. All of them worked under Guan Nuoqin. Shen Liufei didn't expect to find Tang Xiaomo in a place like this, but he could obtain intel from Guan Nuoqin's men discreetly and decided to go with the flow for now. He was led to view his room, which was only a little better than the ones for the slaves. Flies filled the air and the cotton on the floor seemed to be his bed. After he tossed his small bag of belongings down, Shen Liufei was taken to the place where the slaves were locked.

The traffickers had one more task to complete and needed to wait inside the factory. Some slaves had been scammed, others kidnapped, while the rest were unfortunate stowaways who were sold to the traffickers by their leaders. Their inevitable end here was a nightmarish twenty-hour workday with violent beatings if they were caught resting. A-Liang, one of Guan Nuoqin's subordinates who worked there, proudly showed Shen Liufei the unique "weapon" they had created. They would dry up the stingrays they caught and use the sharp and poisonous edges on the back of the rays to beat anyone who tried to escape. The poison would cause a severe allergic reaction and stinging sensation that hurt more than a simple whip.

Sometimes, out of their twisted hearts, the guards would also whip the slaves for entertainment. Just like in the Stanford jail experiment, people who had even the slightest authority in their hands had turned into monsters overnight.

"The luckier ones are sent to work in the factories, and the less fortunate are on the island or boat. If they die there, you won't even find their corpses," a-Liang said, his face twisting grotesquely as he laughed. "Who could have imagined that this beautiful blue sea is actually filled with human bones just under the surface?"

Shen Liufei didn't ask for more information but already seemed to have pieced together some of the puzzle. Kang Xin engaged in criminal activities with Guan Nuoqin because the drug lord could find a matching heart donor for his daughter.

From the bodies of these slaves.

The other man who followed a-Liang hadn't stopped cursing the whole time and kept rambling until night fell and the large constellations became visible above the cityscape. This man and another lackey were Burmese. Because they captured a

portion of slaves from Myanmar, the drug lord had dispatched a few people who spoke Burmese to watch over the slaves in case anyone attempted to riot.

“Curse my damn luck for taking this job! Food’s all smelly fish and shrimp, even the water tastes muddy, and I have to watch over these stinking bastards! The job at Sin House was much better than this. At least there were pretty girls to look at and we could even ‘test the product’ before we sold them off.”

All sorts of complaints and curses shot out of his mouth. The two Burmese men always spoke in their mother tongue in private. They assumed that Shen Liufei couldn’t understand as a Chinese man, so they didn’t hide their conversations before him.

It was then that Shen Liufei suddenly discovered something: he understood Burmese, but he had never studied the language.

Shen Liufei couldn’t let the workers discover that he actually understood Burmese, so he purposely distanced himself from the two men. He sat near the slave cage and lowered his head to polish his dagger, removing himself from all the commotion around him.

Suddenly, someone behind him banged on the cage and made a sound loud enough to alert him but not the rest of the guards.

“Bai Shuo! It’s me, Bai Shuo!” someone called out in Chinese as they rattled the cage bars.

Most Chinese people who lived near the borders of Thailand and Myanmar spoke Mandarin with a heavy Yunnan accent, so it was rare to hear such clean and crisp Mandarin in a place like this. Shen Liufei turned his head and immediately saw the person who called him.

The cage was packed like sardines. The slaves had been starving for days and their faces were covered with grime, but this person had a clean and handsome look that not even the ripped clothing could overshadow.

Shen Liufei narrowed his eyes and studied the man carefully; the young man had eyes that vaguely resembled Xie Lanshan. They were filled with emotion and their light was engraved into his soul, but the slight differences still set the two apart. And, at least in Shen Liufei’s eyes, this young man was nowhere near as attractive as Xie Lanshan.

Yet soon, Shen Liufei recognized the face—this was the Chinese celebrity who had gone missing in Thailand, Wen Jue.

Wen Jue kept calling Shen Liufei “Bai Shuo” because the artist looked uncannily similar to an old friend of his. The young celebrity kept calling out like a broken record, “You... really... really look like him...”

With the unexpected news about Sin House, Shen Liufei had originally thought about finding a way to leave the place as soon as possible, but now that he’d seen Wen Jue, he had no reason to leave this kid behind. He leaned a little closer and whispered quietly to Wen Jue, “I work at Hanhai City’s Public Security Department.

I'm here to rescue you, stay calm."

Just as soon as the word "calm" was spoken, Wen Jue jumped and called out, "You're a c—"

He quickly caught himself and covered his mouth just in time, only revealing those large and bright eyes behind the bars.

Thankfully, there was no other Chinese man inside the cage, but this commotion still caught a-Liang's attention. The guard called out to Shen Liufei, but the artist didn't break a sweat and raised the knife in his hand to greet the man back.

Liang turned his head back after realizing nothing had occurred. The two Burmese men poked their heads out to look at Wen Jue, then turned to laugh with each other in Burmese.

Even though he couldn't understand a word being said, Wen Jue knew it wasn't something good, judging by their nasty expressions. He felt like he was prey under the eyes of two predators and felt uneasy, then quietly asked Shen Liufei, "Bro, do you know what they're saying?"

Shen Liufei translated for him, "They said you're too pretty to be sold to the fishermen, you should be sold to the red-light districts instead."

Wen Jue cried in fear at that moment. Tears rolled down his face like he was a real damsel in distress. His parents were not around, and his manager, Han Guangming, had always spoiled him, not letting the young man even lift a bag while traveling. He couldn't have imagined he would be captured while filming a reality show in a foreign country and sold into slavery.

After this tall and pretty young man cried for a while, he lowered his shoulders and told Shen Liufei, "B-bro, I want to ask you for something..."

Assuming the young man wanted to get out of here, Shen Liufei responded, "Sure."

"I want to ask you..." Wen Jue wiped the tears on his cheeks and said without hesitation, "I want to ask if you can get me some sunscreen, please..."

Shen Liufei turned his head to look at him, his eyes questioning the young man: *Are you serious?*

"The sun's too deadly here." Of course, Wen Jue was being serious. His face was more important than his life. Just how could he explain to all of his fans if he were to come out with a sunburn on his face? He tugged on the collar of his shirt and exposed a small piece of white skin to Shen Liufei, "Look, I even tanned over the last few days I've been locked up in here..."

Shen Liufei didn't agree to the celebrity's unreasonable request and simply said, "I'm here to rescue you, so you have to listen to everything I say now. Do as I request without any questions, understood?"

Wen Jue finally stopped sobbing and tilted his head. Through the dim moonlight shining above their heads, he began studying this undercover cop that was here to rescue him. The more he looked, the more he felt this man resembled his friend. He

said, “You really look a lot like my friend. His name is Bai Shuo—”

Shen Liufei interrupted him, “My last name is Shen.”

“I know you’re not him. You’re much more sophisticated than that guy. He’s a real dumbass, the kind who’s just all muscles and no brains...” Wen Jue’s nervousness manifested into rambling. He saw Shen Liufei as the one ray of hope in this situation and instinctively wanted to cling to him, so the only method he could think of to get closer to the cop was to talk about that friend of his. Continuing to ramble aimlessly, Wen Jue said, “Before my manager found me, I used to hang out with Bai Shuo all the time. He’s a hopeless guy who spends all his time hanging around the Golden Triangle, he even almost got killed by some of those local drug dealers... He said someone saved him during that time and changed his life, so then he moved to the US afterward to become a professional boxer...”

“I’m not interested in your friend’s story,” Shen Liufei once again interrupted him.

Yet his gaze was still glued to the cage behind him. Wen Jue was only twenty-two, but there were many more boys who were younger than him enslaved here. They were to be sold to fishermen or isolated islands, working until they finally joined the corpses that would forever rest beneath the ocean.

There was an old Chinese saying: Blood must be seen with every kill and all lives must be saved with every rescue. Shen Liufei didn’t plan on befriending this celebrity; his thought was to rescue all of the slaves in this factory.

(vi)

It was difficult to narrow in on the culprit and human traffickers with just the Sin House as a clue. This wasn’t Hanhai, so Xie Lanshan couldn’t simply flash his police badge. Of course, it would be no use in a foreign land, so he had no choice but to investigate in secret.

Han Guangming complained that Xie Lanshan was too slow and nagged him every day to hurry with the search.

His ears buzzed with the relentless nagging. Annoyed, Xie Lanshan shifted his gaze and saw a bell hanging beneath the ambient lights, then immediately decided on a way to pay back the man.

“All right, all right, I’ll just call the server over and ask where they hid the culprit.” The two men were seated on the second level of the bar. Xie Lanshan walked over to the bell on the side and reached a hand toward it.

“No, no, no! This isn’t... this isn’t a bell to call the server over!” A person only rang the bell in question if they intended to pay for all checks ordered by that round of customers in the bar. Han Guangming saw Xie Lanshan’s hand on the bell and his eyes popped in horror as he attempted to stop the man.

But it was too late.

One ring of the bell earned cheers from the entire bar.

“Huh? Sorry.” Xie Lanshan pretended he was oblivious to the rules and turned his head, then apologized to Han Guangming with a lifted eyebrow. “Apologies to your wallet.”

They’d agreed that the older man was going to pay for all expenses, and this easily took over ten thousand RMB out of his pocket. As one of the most famous celebrity managers in the country, this was nothing but a small sum to Han Guangming, but the man had always been a selfish businessman who would never engage in a trade without some benefit to himself; if he didn’t care so much about profit, he wouldn’t have risked his life to rescue his source of income in a foreign land.

Losing his celebrity had hit him hard to the point he was willing to risk anything to bring the boy back.

“You—you... you...” He wobbled his way toward Xie Lanshan and pointed at the man, ready to scold him loudly.

Xie Lanshan gave him a snarky grin and reached a hand out to the bell once again.

Han Guangming rushed forward and grabbed onto Xie Lanshan’s arm, then cried out, “Oh, Mister Policeman... no, buddy, wait, sir, Mister Policeman, sir! I don’t think we’ll be able to find anything today. How about we call it a day?”

And that was how Han Guangming and Officer Xie returned to their hotel, though the former was still enraged. In order to scrimp what he could, the manager insisted on sharing a twin room with Xie Lanshan. He removed his smelly socks and shoes, then knocked out on the bed inside the room without showering.

Xie Lanshan was also at a loss; he hadn’t found any clues in or out of the bar. Even as the owner of Sin House, old Zhong Zhuohai was clearly just an owner in name who didn’t involve himself in the bar’s management. There was nothing they could find from his house or company.

After cleaning himself up from a day’s worth of fatigue and grime, Xie Lanshan lay on the bed and closed his eyes.

He had a dream and knew he was in a dream. In it, he blushed from affection while he embraced Shen Liufei tightly. He allowed his raw desire to run rampant while he was outside the confines of reality; Xie Lanshan’s limbs clung to the other man’s body until no space was left between them.

They exchanged kisses again and again—on the nose, lips, neck, and down each other’s collarbones—carefully covering every inch of each other. Shen Liufei caressed his face and kissed his eyes; Xie Lanshan knew he was in a dream, but could still feel himself tearing up.

Before he could get closer to the man, Xie Lanshan noticed his lover freeze. He opened his eyes and saw a bullet pierce through Shen Liufei’s chest. Blood dribbled from the black hole.

“Cuz! Shen Liufei!”

As he cried out and woke up from the dream, he found himself covered in a cold sweat. On the other bed, Han Guangming turned and continued his thunderous

snoring.

It was certainly a strange dream. He was first tossed into a hot pot of temptation before suddenly being thrown out into a blazing snowstorm to freeze to death. Xie Lanshan opened his eyes, got up from his bed, and sat still in the dark. Worry consumed him. He hadn't heard any news of Shen Liufei since he arrived in Thailand and grew concerned that his lover was now in a dangerous situation, like in his dream.

Xie Lanshan wasn't sure how long he sat alone when he heard a sudden rustling sound outside the door. He peeked over and discovered something was shoved through the crack.

He quickly jumped out of bed and opened the door, but the person had already left and he could see no traces of a figure in the dark hallway.

Xie Lanshan returned to his room with suspicion and picked up the item that had been delivered to him: it was a photo of two men together.

He recognized both men in the photo. One was the victim of this case, Anuchit, and the other was his old friend, Gold Tooth.

There was an address left on the back of the photograph that pointed at a quiet rural area.

Xie Lanshan went out the next morning and confirmed that Gold Tooth was one of the managers of Sin House through some investigation. The man currently went by the name of Kay Ponpai and, judging by the situation, it was likely that he now worked for Guan Nuoqin. After the multinational drug enforcement effort that forced Mu Kun to go missing years ago, many of the drug lord's former subordinates who escaped ended up working for Guan Nuoqin.

It was difficult to tell whether the person secretly relaying the message to him was a friend or foe, but with Shen Liufei and Tang Xiaomo weighing on his heart, Xie Lanshan would still cling to this clue even if the address was a trap.

While Han Guangming slept that night, Xie Lanshan secretly left the room on his own and arrived at the address. It was a small house that posed no immediate threat upon careful investigation. Judging from what he could tell from peeking in the window, Gold Tooth was the only one inside the house.

Xie Lanshan was pondering how to sneak in when he realized that Gold Tooth had called for food delivery. The delivery boy arrived just on time and was knocked out immediately from behind by Xie Lanshan.

Xie Lanshan changed into the delivery boy's outfit and pressed the hat down to cover his face when he knocked on the door.

"Why so late?" Gold Tooth didn't notice the commotion outside and opened the door.

Xie Lanshan looked up and smiled at the man inside, then quickly knocked Gold Tooth down before he could react.

By the time Gold Tooth woke up, he was tied to a chair. He turned his head to check his surroundings and noticed he was inside a messy room that looked like an

old storage unit. A dim light that hung from the ceiling swayed soundlessly, flashing an uneven glow in the space while large flies circled above the lamp.

Xie Lanshan pulled up an old wooden chair and sat in front of Gold Tooth, then gave the man a smile as soon as he woke. “Long time no see. Still remember me?”

The storage unit was well ventilated, but because of the hot climate, only moist and hot air managed to flow in. In front of his old friend, Gold Tooth began sweating nervously. He had recognized Xie Lanshan the first day the young cop appeared in Sin House and thought he could get away by hiding for a few days, but reality proved him wrong.

Gold Tooth knew that the Thai police were investigating Anuchit’s death and assumed Xie Lanshan was here for the same reason, so he quickly explained, “I didn’t kill Anuchit. I wanted to kill him that day, but I already found him dead by the time I got to his house...”

Xie Lanshan was not interested in Anuchit’s death and simply took out a photo of Tang Xiaomo to ask if the man had seen the girl, as she was likely taken by one of their men.

Gold Tooth moved his dry lips and denied it. “I don’t know her... never seen her before...”

“Wrong answer.” The flash of shock across his eyes the moment he saw the photo gave away the truth. Xie Lanshan stood up beside Gold Tooth and dislocated the man’s right shoulder without hesitation.

Gold Tooth was caught off guard by this violent attack and cried out in pain.

“Have you seen this girl before? Where did you take her?” Xie Lanshan leaned down and whispered into his hostage’s ear, “This is the second time I’m asking, I hope your memory doesn’t fail you this time.”

Gold Tooth knew Xie Lanshan’s docile nature and could never forget this man, even if he hated him. This young cop was a man of few words and always had an air of justice around him. It was this strange aura that always made him suspect Xie Lanshan’s true identity, but it was also the same reason he wasn’t afraid of falling into Xie Lanshan’s hands.

Yet now, he felt like he was facing the devil himself.

“You... let me go this once. I can tell you anything you want to know. I’m only just working for Guan Nuoqin...” Out of self-defensive instinct, Gold Tooth confessed that all the kidnapped pretty young ladies were sent to a secret club called “The Morphia Show” where the rich would pay huge sums of money to satiate their twisted desires.

By the time Gold Tooth had given out the exact address of the club, he was already drenched in cold sweat. He once again begged, “All right, that’s all I know, so please let me go...”

Xie Lanshan smiled and sat back down on the wooden chair, then said, “What’s the rush? We haven’t even had the chance to catch up yet.”

The source of his suffering could be traced back to that day. He had fallen into Gold Tooth's trap and lost his life when the gang had taken his body from him.

That was how he'd ended up in this horrible predicament, trapped in another person's body, betrayed by his comrades, and almost even lost his loved one.

Xie Lanshan gave a dark smile before his prey; the grin became colored with hatred, which was a beautiful yet horrifying image to behold. He said, "I remember that you were the one who ordered the gangs to trail me... you left me for dead in a dark alleyway..."

Afraid that Mu Kun would discover it was his doing, Gold Tooth had paid extra to a gang that didn't work for him. He ordered the men to run as fast as they could after they killed Xie Lanshan and to never return or contact him again. As soon as he discovered that Xie Lanshan was still alive, Gold Tooth had always assumed that the hitmen he'd hired didn't do their job right and was upset with the result.

"But aren't you still alive?" Gold Tooth was admittedly a little relieved right now and groped to find anything that might excuse him. He began struggling and moved around the chair as he said, "You're fine now... I heard someone who passed by took you to the hospital later..."

The clatter of the chair was too loud, so Xie Lanshan shushed Gold Tooth. Then he pulled out a pair of vinyl gloves from his pocket and slowly put them on. They fit snugly on his long fingers. The white color made them look like sharp blades in the night.

He stood up and gently pushed the lamp hanging above his head. Beneath the swaying light, he slowly strode toward his horrified and despairing prey.

(vii)

"I spent too much money on you already, don't you dare try and leave me behind!"

Han Guangming had followed Xie Lanshan out but was too scared to approach. He feared being found out, but within the blink of an eye, the young cop disappeared. By the time he discovered the man by an abandoned storage unit, he barged in through the door.

Han Guangming was stunned by the scene before him; the face of the man tied to the wooden chair was covered in blood. He was barely breathing and was unrecognizable. The man struggled to lift his head as soon as he heard someone walk in, and opened his eyes. His trembling lips looked as if they were ready to cry out for help, but he couldn't even close his mouth properly as fresh blood rolled out along with a tooth.

His jaw was dislocated; the pain was unimaginable, but it wasn't a difficult injury to fix with proper equipment.

"What... what happened here..." Han Guangming saw Xie Lanshan stand beneath the swaying lamp, staring at his bloody gloves under the dim light. Han Guangming

could feel himself stuttering in shock.

As if he wasn't the one who had just interrogated Gold Tooth earlier, Xie Lanshan turned his expressionless face to Han Guangming and asked nonchalantly, "Did you rent a car?"

Han Guangming was still shaking when he answered, "I... did. The car's still waiting outside."

"All right." Xie Lanshan smiled and stepped out of the storage unit. He then told Han Guangming, "Clean up this place for me and we'll be off."

Clean up what? Han Guangming lowered his head to see splashes of blood on the ground and felt a chill. He picked up a photo of a young girl that had dropped to the ground and then checked his surroundings to make sure nothing else was left behind.

Xie Lanshan called out from outside in annoyance, "Hurry up!"

The young cop had already removed the gloves and likely disposed of them as well. He got in the car that Han Guangming had rented and stared forward without blinking. His whole body was frozen like a statue. His expression was calm, almost as if he was dissociating, but he also held all the madness in the world within him. It made him look as if he was a demon in the mortal world.

Han Guangming had been eyeing Xie Lanshan for the last few days. He realized that this young cop was prettier than Wen Jue. In other words, he was a diamond in the rough. He could give up being a cop and find a new career in the entertainment industry, but now, Han Guangming no longer dared to ask about the possibility.

This man was mad—he was insane.

The night was like a turbulent black river in the sky. The place was warm like an oven during the day, but the cold evening breeze sent a chill through the car. The two men didn't converse during their trip. Han Guangming was fearful of the expression on the cop's face. He shuddered once, then a second time.

Xie Lanshan turned to him and gave the man a mocking grin. "Why are you still following me if you're so scared of me?"

Han Guangming didn't dare let his guard down and denied it, "H-how am I scared of you? Besides, who's going to find my little Jue if I don't follow you?"

Xie Lanshan only responded mildly, "You don't have to follow me anymore, the Blue Foxes are here already. Unlike me, none of them are bad cops, and they weren't suspended or abandoned. They're the elite of the elite. I'm sure you'll be able to find your celebrity soon if you follow them."

Han Guangming pondered slightly before he suddenly came to a conclusion and said, shaking his head, "I don't know them and I'm sure they won't take me along in their investigations. Either way, I'm following you; you go find your friend and I'll go find my little Jue, that's all..."

"Whatever." Xie Lanshan chuckled lightly and then turned his gaze forward. His black eyes blended in with the darkness of the night in this foreign land. Han Guangming almost couldn't tell if the darkness was from the sky or this man.

The driver that Han Guangming had hired was a cautious man who was quite proficient in Chinese as well. After the two suspicious men left, he immediately called the cops.

By the time the police department received the report, Chi Jin and Ling Yun had already arrived and were discussing Wen Jue's kidnapping case overnight with the Bangkok police. Realizing that one of the men the driver met was Xie Lanshan based on the description, the old cop Somsak immediately rushed to the abandoned storage unit.

He was a step too late. Gold Tooth was already dead.

Though many injuries remained on the victim's body, the actual cause of death was asphyxiation by suffocation.

Chi Jin checked the corpse with Somsak and said with a frown, "The victim's dislocated joints were clearly done through professional wrestling techniques; it's impossible for an average person to do this. The culprit must be Xie Lanshan."

Xie Lanshan's secret was exposed as soon as he'd left the bureau on his own. Chi Jing already heard the truth from Director Peng and knew that it was Xie Lanshan's fault that Sui Hong was suspended.

Of course, Ling Yun knew about the changes in Xie Lanshan, but he wasn't convinced the cop was the culprit. The soul of the Blue Fox was engraved into every member, whether they were new or a veteran—that was what he believed. After giving it some thought, he gave a different perspective to the team, "There's about an hour between the time Xie Lanshan left and when we arrived at this place, so even if Xie Lanshan did interrogate this man, the true culprit could have been someone else ___"

"Why are you always speaking up for an outsider?" Chi Jin interrupted Ling Yun harshly and tugged at his own collar in annoyance—or perhaps because of the heat. He grew anxious and said, "I'll report everything to Director Peng here and let him decide what to do with Xie Lanshan!"

Ling Yun felt that Chi Jin was becoming more irritable as of late. Sweat covered the man's forehead and his fist was clenched so tight that a few veins popped up unnaturally around his hand. Seeing more sweat roll down Chi Jin's face and the young vice captain's breathing grow rough, Ling Yun sensed something was off. He didn't feel that the night in Thailand was particularly hot and asked, "A-Chi, are you all right?"

Chi Jin's expression was still filled with rage when he shot back, "You should call me 'Captain' right now."

Before Ling Yun could respond, Chi Jin turned to Somsak and said, "Xie Lanshan has long been kicked out of the Blue Foxes and was suspended from the violent crimes unit back home too. He's not one of us or a cop anymore. You guys don't need to go easy on him!"

The team returned to the bureau. Somsak reported the incident along with the details of all the internal conflicts among the Blue Fox to Chief Kang Tai.

Kang Tai was nothing like his twin brother Kang Xin; the latter was honest and humble, and not very good in social situations, but Kang Tai always spoke with confidence in Chinese and ordered the entire bureau to cooperate with the Blue Foxes to bring the suspect back.

Just as soon as the old cop left the chief's office, Kang Tai called Guan Nuoqin and said, "Those Chinese have their men over now. I arranged for Gold Tooth to take care of Anuchit, but I didn't expect him to die too. The situation's complicated right now. I'm not sure if we can safely send out those people we captured."

After the Chinese, American, and Burmese forces hunted Mu Kun down, Guan Nuoqin quickly overtook Mu Kun's territory and regrouped his men. In order to avoid the same fate, the man stepped away from the dying old drug trade and had been staying under the radar for a while. Thailand was his home base; not only did he manage to get some police on his side, but he also had a close relationship with the local rich businessmen.

Guan Nuoqin stated the situation was tough right now, so he needed to find the culprit that killed Gold Tooth as soon as possible, regardless of whether the person was dead or not. He would rather not risk letting the killer run free and ruin his human-trafficking business.

Of course, his worry wasn't baseless. Most of the men and women they sold were from Myanmar or Cambodia, but sometimes they would also kidnap celebrities like Wen Jue from Thailand. These people tended to be lost tourists, so the local police on the borders would never imagine they would get involved in human trafficking. Kang Tai pondered a little before smiling; it wouldn't be hard to keep evidence away from the Blue Foxes and he could just let them fight amongst themselves.

He told his drug-lord partner that he would report this to his boss and twist it so that it would seem as though Chinese police had murdered a man here in Thailand.

As soon as Kang Tai hung up, Kang Xin walked into the office. The latter closed the door at his brother's gesture, a difficult look on his face.

They were a strange pair of twins; despite having the same face, their demeanors were completely different. The younger brother was tough but ruffled while the older brother was always a little too well-dressed for any occasion. His hair was always smooth and shiny, his cheekbones were visible, and his sharp jaw made him look sly. That was why, despite working in the same police department, no one ever had problems telling the twins apart.

Kang Tai was quite annoyed at his brother. He always wanted his brother to work for Guan Nuoqin. With Kang Xin's abilities, it wouldn't be hard for the man to earn some profit from the mafia. If the brothers could obtain benefits from both the mafia and the police department, their social status would naturally rise. Yet Kang Xin refused to abandon his job as a cop, however, and stubbornly worked his low-paying

job to support his dying daughter.

On the other hand, Kang Xin knew his brother was tied up with the biggest drug lord of the Golden Triangle right now, and was well aware of the tragic ends of those missing persons. Kang Xin stared angrily at his brother and said coldly, “Stop what you’re doing. You’ve already pocketed more money than you can ever spend in your life, so why are you still harming so many others?”

Kang Tai refused to look at his brother and carefully fixed his sleeves, then said, “And what makes you think you’re better than me? You’re doing this for your daughter, I’m doing it for money. We share the same genes, and neither of us are good men.”

Kang Xin was speechless. He really had decided to step in for his daughter, allowing the promise he’d made to her to blind his sight and heart. He’d allowed a-Liang to order him around and had done things he’d never wanted to. Even if his kind heart made him feel as though he was constantly being burned at the stake while between these two morally difficult choices, he still had chosen to take this path.

Kang Tai took this opportunity to roll up his left sleeve, exposing a menacing burn scar on his arm. That was an injury he’d gotten when they were little. Their house had suddenly caught on fire, and he’d burned himself to save his younger brother.

After Kang Tai hinted that his brother owed him a favor, he patted the younger one’s face before kicking him out of the office with arrogance and disgust.

Still stuck on the murder cases, Kang Xin dragged his annoyance and his tired body out of the bureau to buy some hot street food to bring back home. He opened the door and gently called his daughter’s name. There was no response. Perhaps she had already fallen asleep.

The house the father and daughter lived in was quite small, but it was bright and homey. Kang Xin put down the food in the kitchen and tiptoed into the girl’s room. The bedroom walls were repainted a light pink. A wind chime hung by the window that rang with a beautiful tone with the passing breeze.

His ten-year-old daughter was sleeping with a dirty teddy bear in her arms. Kang Xin gently touched Yaya’s hair and watched her quiet, sleeping face with affection. Her face was pale and her lips purple; the only way she could live was with a cocktail of daily medication.

According to the doctor, her small liver was also at its limit.

Suddenly, the little girl on the bed frowned in pain, either due to a nightmare or her illness, and her whole body shivered.

“Yaya? Yaya!” Kang Xin almost forgot to breathe out of anxiety; he called his daughter’s name while rushing to find her medication.

Thankfully, the girl wasn’t in pain and simply hugged her teddy bear tighter before falling back asleep.

Having DCM meant that her heart was swollen inside her small body. Yaya couldn’t even walk normally and would kneel in pain after even a few steps to pant

heavily by her feet.

With her condition now, she had dropped out of school to rest at home. Her heart was still swelling and she couldn't even perform everyday tasks. Her father carried his daughter around all the major hospitals in Thailand for help, and yet despite the inevitable death looming above her, he still refused to give up.

All the doctors agreed that a heart transplant was the only way to save her.

Kang Xin left his daughter's room after the scare and closed the door.

He gave a-Liang a call to ask if they'd found an appropriate donor yet.

"You guys keep dragging this out day after day. Just when will you find a donor?"

"Your daughter is so small and thin, we can't even be sure whether an adult heart can be placed in her." Knowing that the man was the brother of the police department's branch chief, a-Liang didn't curse out loud and only said, "Even our boss can't just get a heart surgery as he pleases, so your daughter needs to wait..."

"She can't!" As soon as she got a heart transplant, he would be able to leave this disgusting trade and repent for his sins through his blood and life. The man was on the verge of a breakdown and growled like a trapped beast, "Even if I have to kill someone right now, I would do it so that Yaya can get her heart trans—"

He wasn't sure when Yaya appeared behind him with the dirty stuffed animal in her hands. Kang Xin had thought about buying a new one for his daughter multiple times, but Yaya was a sentimental girl who would never give up an old toy even after it was ragged.

Kang Xin turned around to see his daughter, froze on the spot, and quietly hung up the phone.

He looked down at her while she looked up to meet his gaze. Yaya was smarter and more mature than most girls her age. She had also heard every word that her father had said.

When she wasn't bedridden, she would boast about her father and regale others of all sorts of heroic stories she had of the man. She would walk proudly at school and say that her dad was a hero.

To this sickly young girl, the rare happiness and hope in her life came only from her father, who was like the rising sun that brought light to the world.

Yet the man before her right now who shouted about murder made her feel afraid.

After a long silence, the girl finally spoke up, "Daddy, are you still a hero?"

Kang Xin was taken aback; he wanted to respond with confidence that he was but also didn't want to lie to his daughter. He finally knelt before her, embraced her gently, and buried his face in her small shoulders. Tears welled up in his eyes. He refused to let them fall and sniffed heavily before finally saying, "Yaya, go back to sleep. We still need to go to the hospital tomorrow..."

The girl was deeply disappointed by her father's avoidance of the question. She pulled herself out of his embrace and walked away. She was exhausted and couldn't even hold the teddy bear in her hands, so she could only grab one of its legs and drag

it with her.

She stopped before her bedroom door and turned to look at her father again. A heavy shadow cast over her bright and large eyes like a solar eclipse. It was heartbreaking to see such a vibrant life hold such a deathly silent gaze.

Kang Xin also felt his heart bleed at this gaze. He finally dropped to the ground after sending his daughter back to her room. His head hung down, and he cried as he bit his fist, letting his teeth sink into his flesh. He really didn't know how to find a way out of this situation.

Hello, My Dear

Before Wen Jue was kidnapped, the celebrity's life was fully taken care of by his manager, Han Guangming—in other words, he had the real life of a prince. He refused to live in anything less than a five-star hotel, his vehicle of choice was a Ferrari, and he bathed in fresh mineral water. Even during mealtimes, all fishbones were removed from his dishes personally by Han Guangming's hand. Despite being waited upon hand and foot, Wen Jue still often complained for the sole purpose of causing trouble.

Wen Jue was also a crybaby. He often cried more than a girl onscreen, but his fans praised him for being sensitive and having a delicate heart. He had always believed that even if his life was now being dictated by the flowers, cheers, and countless admiring gazes of young women, it was worth living. Before he became famous, he'd had a tough life: he'd taken up part-time jobs wherever he could, and during the toughest times, he'd also cut down his meals to save money. Recalling those experiences, he would often cry about his horrible past.

Of course, he never would have imagined living a day even worse than when he'd worked five jobs a day. He also never realized that the world also had such a cruel, raw, and monstrous side.

The hundred or so men froze on the ground as if they were waiting for a serious order. Afraid that a well-satiated slave would cause trouble, the slaveholders never fed them fully during meals. The meal itself was also rice mixed with fish and shrimp served inside a rusted tin can. The people would fight for the food without mercy. Some unlucky ones who didn't get to eat had no one to blame but themselves for their empty stomachs.

Wen Jue obviously wasn't fit enough to grab even a bite when pitted against everyone else, and if he managed to get something, he couldn't swallow the fishy smell. This left him hungry, and he stared at Shen Liufei like a lost puppy as he called to him, "Big bro."

Shen Liufei tossed a cookie to him.

"Bro..." Wen Jue wasn't satisfied and begged for more, "Can I get something to drink too? I prefer milk."

Just as he was about to gripe about the cookie in his hand, he met Shen Liufei's cold gaze and swallowed all his complaints.

He quickly opened the cookie package; the smell of wheat almost made tears roll down his face. As Wen Jue was about to take a bite, he noticed a little boy beside him

staring right at his food.

The boy was deathly thin from head to toe. He was only thirteen or fourteen but looked like he was a dried-up tree trunk. He stared at the cookie in Wen Jue's hand; his eyes glistened until drool rolled down his mouth.

"I'm starving..." Wen Jue didn't feel comfortable with this gaze and turned around to eat his cookie, but he still had a feeling that the boy was looking at him from behind.

"All right, you can have one bite... just one bite..." He turned around and broke the cookie in half. After checking the size of the cookie, he kept the larger piece for himself and handed the smaller one off.

As they munched on the food, another car drove by at a distance. A team of medics dressed in white lab coats got out of the car and said they were here to do physical checkups for all the slaves.

Everyone was marked with a number before blood tests were taken. A slave took this opportunity to attempt an escape but was quickly caught by a-Liang, who whacked the runaway with the stingray whip on the face.

The stinger struck violently into the neck of the runaway. As fresh blood poured out of the man's wound, his eyes widened in shock and he dropped to the ground with his hand on his neck.

Liang remained unfazed at this scene. To him, these people were like moles growing in the Golden Triangle. They could easily be replaced. Shen Liufei darted up and helped stop the man's bleeding, then treated the wound.

The injury was quite small and hadn't nicked any vital point, but a neck injury was still a serious wound that needed immediate attention. Shen Liufei ripped a piece of cloth from the man's clothes, lifted the arm near the injury above his head, and pressed down to stop the bleeding.

As soon as he reached for the man's arm, the man on the ground reached out a bloody hand toward Shen Liufei as if grabbing onto his last ray of hope and begged in Burmese, "Save me... save me..."

Bro... I'm also Chinese... save me...

A familiar scene flashed in Shen Liufei's mind as the blood became a strong stimulation to his eyes. The artist was taken aback by this sudden scene, and his memories rolled back like an old silent film.

He'd once stood up for a woman at a bar, which had offended a drug dealer, and as a result, he'd had his throat slit by a sharp fragment from a broken glass. The drug dealers had scattered like flocks of pigeons, police cars and ambulances had rushed over to carry the dying young man with the neck injury into the car. One second too late, and he would have died at the scene.

Because he received immediate treatment at the time, the young boy's life had been saved, and tonight, he finally remembered who had saved his life that day.

After saving the injured man before him, Shen Liufei stepped back and sat down, staring at the bullet necklace around his wrist.

Night once again fell on this deserted land like a flood of black water while the moon stood out bright and round. Wen Jue was done with his blood test and was being sent back into his cage. He turned and leaned toward Shen Liufei, asking curiously, “Why are you always staring at that bracelet? Is it from your girlfriend?”

Shen Liufei didn’t respond and kept his gaze fixed on his wrist. The blood on his fingers had already dried, so the dark crimson complemented his pale white skin and long fingers.

“Hey, bro? Bro?”

Shen Liufei didn’t respond.

After a long while, Wen Jue saw the man’s lips move slightly. Like a melted layer of snow, a beautiful grin arose on that stony face.

The hidden mark left on his life had suddenly been uncovered in this quiet night; no coincidences in the world occurred without reason and the most delightful part of this karmic cycle was their reunion.

Shen Liufei lowered his gaze and smiled, then whispered, “So it was you.”

Xie Lanshan wasn’t sure if anyone else aside from Gold Tooth would recognize him and had no choice but to disguise himself to sneak his way into the secret club. As a man with a career in the entertainment industry, Han Guangming was skilled in theatrical makeup. He prepared everything from a fake beard to makeup supplies for Xie Lanshan, and even offered to help put them on the man’s face with special effect makeup.

He curled his hair and tied it up in the back. He wore a pair of fake glasses and changed into an expensive suit, quickly transforming himself into a rich and seductive libertine.

Xie Lanshan examined himself in front of the mirror and scratched his fake beard with his thumb in satisfaction. He turned around to see Han Guangming also putting on makeup and asked in shock, “Why are you dressing up too?”

“I’m coming with you! I don’t feel comfortable letting you go on your own.” Han Guangming was leaning down toward the mirror and putting on false lashes. His careful actions were obviously from an experienced hand. He said as he dressed himself up, “Besides, you won’t be able to get in without my money.”

He finished putting the falsies on as soon as he uttered his last word. Han Guangming turned abruptly after putting down his arm and winked at Xie Lanshan, then said in a high-pitched voice, “How do I look, darling?”

A colorful and large face appeared right before Xie Lanshan’s eyes, almost making the cop choke on thin air. He immediately thought of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*—recalling everything from the horrifying monsters and demons described in the text—and compared it to the ugly face before him.

Han Guangming was short and bulky, though the makeup wasn't particularly strange on his face. Their clothes were purchased locally. In order to properly disguise himself as a woman, Han Guangming had changed into a wine-red silk dress, which expertly hid his thick and hairy legs and squeezed tight around his thick body, making him look like a sausage stuffed in its casing.

Han Guangming's plan was for them to disguise themselves as a couple with unique kinks. This secret club also offered sex services and allowed the customers to do anything they wanted to the workers they purchased. People who were willing to drop the money to use this service were clearly rich individuals with nasty interests.

Thankfully, Han Guangming had plenty of money, the most versatile form of power, which could also buy off the security guards. The two successfully found their way inside the club and the disguised "couple" pretended to exchange passionate kisses on the cheeks before everyone else in the club. They looked the part of a rich madame with her young, handsome, and vulgar husband down for some fun in the club.

After one kiss on each cheek, Han Guangming puckered up his lips and abruptly aimed for Xie Lanshan's mouth. The cop couldn't reject the gesture and had to muster up the courage for this direct kiss.

The waiter received a hefty tip and led the two into a private room with a smile.

Xie Lanshan couldn't afford to let them suspect their fake identities and kept a smile on his face, then whispered very quietly into Han Guangming's ear, "I will kill you if you kiss me again."

Perhaps some aspect of the excursion had awakened something inside of Han Guangming, but he was rather pleased with this response and held Xie Lanshan's arm as they walked inside. His large form sashayed as he walked, and he said into Xie Lanshan's ear, "Look how beautiful I am, don't you want to kiss me?"

Xie Lanshan responded with a smile, "I want to die."

Unlike the crowded bars outside, the club's lights were dim and only a few peculiar red lights shone from the corners, like they were slicing through the silence in the room.

A strange scent mixed with weed and other curious herbs lingered in the air. Xie Lanshan could hear hushed weeping the moment he stepped into the club, like wordless cries for help.

Even Han Guangming, who had been in high spirits, was shocked. He passed through these alarming red lights still clinging to Xie Lanshan. He would turn his head to glance at the young man beside him occasionally, noticing the red glow cast on his face like a stream of blood.

Around twenty people of both sexes offered special services, though the majority were women. They all had good looks and youthful bodies that were used to satisfy the most twisted and dark desires in the world while they cowered in fear and despair every day. Xie Lanshan saw a young woman bound in metal chains. She was topless,

and some sort of strong acid had destroyed the skin on her back, resulting in snakelike scales.

The woman noticed someone staring at her and turned her head, then hissed angrily at the man.

Xie Lanshan noticed that her tongue had been artificially cut at the tip; her role here was a snake woman.

Security guards and bodyguards were stationed inside and outside the club. They were all perhaps Guan Nuoqin's subordinates. Xie Lanshan was on his own and could only act when an opportunity opened up.

He didn't see Tang Xiaomo among these men and women. Xie Lanshan pretended to have high standards and complained that he wasn't interested in the existing cast, then asked the waiter if there were any newcomers.

The waiter gave him a difficult look and refused to tell the truth until Han Guangming pried a ring off one of his fingers and quietly shoved it in the man's hands. It was a two-karat diamond ring.

The waiter could immediately tell the value of the ring and purposely ignored the rough man's hand that exposed his identity. He happily introduced the new products they'd received, but mentioned that they had been sent to Zhong Zhuohai's mansion.

"Some Thai people are very superstitious. The man's about to take on a very important surgery, so he requested people to perform for him before he goes in—in other words," the waiter said with a smile, "by offering sacrifices."

(ii)

On a foggy night in Bangkok, old Somsak was attacked on his way home. The perpetrator was an expert with swift and deadly moves.

Somsak didn't have a chance to fight back and quickly gave in. He was quite a fighter himself when he was younger, but old age had gotten to him in recent years. He could sense that the perpetrator didn't have any ill intent when his hands were freed. The culprit ripped off the fake mustache on his face and gave a small smile to the old cop, "You're getting old."

"Xie Lanshan?" After confirming this familiar face before him, Somsak was stunned. The news had just revealed that this man was a murder suspect, yet Xie Lanshan still dared to show up in front of a cop.

Clinging onto their old friendship, Somsak told him that their branch Chief Kang Tai was the one who insisted he killed Gold Tooth and had already reported this to the branch's bosses.

It seemed as if bad luck followed him everywhere; Xie Lanshan almost wanted to laugh, but instead, said with confidence, "I didn't kill anyone. If your chief insists that I'm the killer, he's either dumb, or has a hidden agenda."

Xie Lanshan risked getting in touch with Somsak originally to let the old cop report to their branch about the hostages in Zhong Zhuohai's mansion, hoping the Blue Foxes and Thai police could save the victims, but after some thought, he realized something felt strange about the situation.

There could be a mole in the Bangkok police department.

Somsak froze and didn't respond to Xie Lanshan's speculation. Xie Lanshan could tell the old man didn't trust him and spoke up to break the silence, "Do you really think I'm the culprit?"

"If the suspect was you from a few years ago, I certainly never would have believed it." Somsak looked right into Xie Lanshan's eyes to study the subtle changes on the man's face, then finally let out a long sigh after a while. "But as for you right now... I can't say."

The old cop may not have known the complications behind the situation, but he was still an experienced investigator with a keen eye. He instinctively felt that this Xie Lanshan before him was not the same person as the young undercover one he'd met many years ago.

"I beat him up for something he did that I couldn't forgive, or more precisely, I interrogated him." Xie Lanshan's eyes looked like a tide that was dangerously ready to overturn. The coldness within that gaze pierced the old cop as he insisted, "But I didn't kill him."

After a long and silent look shared between the two, Somsak finally let go of his suspicion and said, "All right, I believe you. So what are you here for tonight?"

Assuming that a millionaire like Zhong Zhuohai would have more than just one estate in the area, Xie Lanshan asked, "Do you know where Zhong Zhuohai is lately?"

Despite knowing that Zhong Zhuohai was one of the investors of Sin House, the police couldn't find anything else about him. He was a clean businessman with a history of donating to civil services and he showed no hint of criminal behavior. Somsak couldn't understand the question and responded after giving it some thought, "Zhong Zhuohai attended an Asia business conference earlier. He's on his way back on his private jet tonight."

Xie Lanshan's expression darkened as he said, "I have two requests from you. First, please find out where Zhong Zhuohai is staying after he lands today and tell both me and the Blue Foxes, but don't tell any police officers in your branch no matter who they are. This includes your partner, Officer Kang Xin."

Xie Lanshan didn't know how well Chi Jin and Ling Yun could trust Somsak, so he left a handwritten note for them instead. He borrowed a pen from Somsak and wrote down the situation on a piece of paper.

Considering the two young men might not recognize his handwriting, he drew a little Blue Fox symbol at the bottom of the note. Drawing required skills that Xie Lanshan clearly lacked with his barely distinguishable fox doodle. This made him

remember Shen Liufei once again, which left his heart feeling heavy.

He wasn't sure where the man was right now but optimistically thought that if Shen Liufei was also tracking Tang Xiaomo down, perhaps they would meet again very soon.

He then remembered that nightmare: the scene of a bullet passing through Shen Liufei's chest was fresh in his mind. He was afraid and wouldn't risk any chances that he might lose the man.

Therefore, he told the old cop his second request, "Second, find me a gun."

Less than two days later, A-Liang received a new mission to send hostage number 49 to a designated location.

Shen Liufei hinted at Wen Jue to change numbers with number 49 while he volunteered to complete the job.

Coincidentally, this number 49 was the young boy he had shared the cookie with.

Human trafficking still ran rampant in Southeast Asia, and while some people were sold into slavery, others became unwilling organ donors in the black market. Being sent off wasn't something to celebrate. Every slave here knew that this was a trip of no return and that there would only be tragedy awaiting them ahead. The boy was in debt to Wen Jue and secretly pulled on the young man's sleeve, then shook his head.

If this was any normal circumstance, Wen Jue would have been crying and begging to not risk his life right now, but perhaps because he saw his former best friend in Shen Liufei, he blindly trusted the man and did as he was told.

Or perhaps he was moved by the torment of this mortal world. Wen Jue didn't expect the little boy to even know about repaying others for their kindness. He held the little hand that grabbed onto his sleeve and gave the boy a smile.

Liang and his crew had just gotten high and were gambling with playing cards; no one was in the mood to take on the job, so they were more than happy to let Shen Liufei handle it. A-Liang didn't move from his seat and asked Shen Liufei to bring some good booze back after he finished.

Shen Liufei knew what these people were like and gave a quiet nod, then dragged Wen Jue off.

The original plan was for him to send off the hostage personally, and once they left this dangerous zone, he could escape with Wen Jue along the way on the road. Of course, things didn't go as planned. As soon as he left the factory, a car drove up to them from a distance. Perhaps the receiver was being cautious and had decided to send in someone to watch over them.

Shen Liufei had gotten a handle of the area over the last few days. The factory was located in a deserted mountain area with no sign of others; it was difficult to even find a hiding spot if one managed to escape. Of course, being caught would become another horrifying story altogether. That was why he immediately came up with the idea of switching identities with Wen Jue.

Before the cars could drive closer, Shen Liufei quickly took off his clean shirt to change into Wen Jue's smelly and old clothes.

There was no time to hesitate and ponder the risks, so Wen Jue also stripped. He suddenly looked up to see Shen Liufei's topless body, which was like a sculpted marble statue. The phoenix tattoo on his back appeared as though it were breathing and alive on his flesh. Wen Jue gasped out loud.

He recognized that tattoo. It was Bai Shuo's.

Shen Liufei explained quickly as he changed, "If Guan Nuoqin can roam around so freely, that means he has one of his men in the police department—perhaps a high-ranking official. If you escape, don't call the cops. Go to one of the Chinese embassies around the area or find a Blue Fox member..."

His advice didn't receive a response even after he finished changing. Shen Liufei turned to see Wen Jue stare wide-eyed and dumbly at him, and had a good guess as to what the young celebrity was thinking. He reiterated calmly, "If you don't want to die, listen to every word I say."

After pulling himself out of shock, Wen Jue nodded, afraid to think too deeply about the true identity of this man before him.

Shen Liufei hid the dagger in his clothes and wiped a handful of dirt on his face. The next moment, a large black Jeep stopped in front of them almost menacingly.

There were two others in the car aside from the driver. Every one of them held a gun in their hands; Shen Liufei scanned the surroundings and didn't plan on alarming the predators.

The destination they were told earlier had changed, which was why they'd sent in another escort. The mastermind was clearly very cautious.

Shen Liufei was pushed into the back seat and sandwiched between two men while Wen Jue sat nervously on the passenger side.

"Why so dirty?" One man in the back seat gave Shen Liufei a disgusted look at first, then suddenly studied him from top to bottom. His eyes glowed the more he looked, before he finally clicked his tongue and complained, "This kid's got quite the looks. Should have been sold to please those rich bitches. It's almost a waste to just take his heart out."

"Guy's a millionaire. He could easily buy off the best host in the red-light district if he wanted to. Too bad the results came out and it was a match." The other man gave a snarky laugh and said, "Who cares if you're a millionaire or some philanthropist? Everyone wants to live longer when they're facing death!"

Shen Liufei understood the conversation in Burmese, but he soon had a question. As one of the Golden Triangle's drug lords, Guan Nuoqin had always based his forces in Thailand. Why were his subordinates from Myanmar? He had heard about Mu Kun from Xie Lanshan before. Mu Kun disappeared for a while and perhaps left a few underlings around the region, which likely meant that Guan Nuoqin took these lackeys in.

The car drove further out of the mountainous region, and the fog within the woods finally cleared up as the road became smoother and wider.

The driver glanced toward Wen Jue and joined in this pointless conversation. “This kid’s not bad either, hah!”

He said something vulgar in Thai and the three men in the car who understood it laughed.

The laughter was too sharp and vulgar, almost like they were spitting right on Wen Jue’s face. Wen Jue’s English was bad and he couldn’t understand a word of Thai; he could only feel fear, to the point where his lips trembled while strange sounds came out of his mouth.

But he didn’t even need to turn his head to know that Shen Liufei was still as calm as usual behind him.

That was why he decided to use all of his skills as an actor to maintain his cool. He refused to speak, move, or tremble, but most importantly—he could not expose their identities.

(iii)

The black Jeep rushed onto the road like a raging tornado until it finally arrived at a secret mansion hidden within the mountains. From afar, it looked like an ethereal castle resting in the midst of nature.

A few people dressed in black were already waiting by the front gate, all standing with their hands crossed in front of them, expressionless like puppets ready to fight. They noticed the Jeep and hurried over to the car. Shen Liufei finally noticed that all of these people dressed in black had a gun around their waist.

As soon as everyone got out of the car, Shen Liufei was dragged toward the mansion by these black-suited people, one on each side.

The rope was on his wrists, but he had already secretly untied himself in the car—he was only pretending to still be restrained. In terms of just close combat, Shen Liufei was confident he could take on anyone in this place. He knew well that the former owner of this body was an MMA Champion, but he needed to be patient and act only after Wen Jue left. He didn’t want to worry about the young man’s safety; it would only end up distracting him during a fight. Keeping him around would greatly reduce the chances of them escaping, even possibly putting Wen Jue’s life in more danger.

One escort tossed a bag at Wen Jue, said something in English to him, which sounded like they wanted him to bring something back to a-Liang.

The person opened his suit jacket and exposed the gun at his waist; Wen Jue noticed this and was immediately covered in cold sweat. He took in a breath of cold air and choked into a coughing fit. He could only pretend he was in a dangerous action movie—that the cameras were filming in secret—to calm himself down or he

would have stood frozen on the spot.

He already guessed the purpose of this trip; the people here were planning on removing Shen Liufei's heart for a rich man's surgery.

He also confirmed Shen Liufei's identity. Bai Shuo had lost contact after his car accident. The last piece of news he'd received about his best friend was that Bai Shuo had suffered brain damage and became vegetative.

Wen Jue and another man in a suit walked behind Shen Liufei, staring at the latter with a complicated expression on his face. The man's figure from the back was especially elegant and tall, like a majestic mountain range.

The group of people entered the Zhong mansion. Before entering the residence, Shen Liufei turned and glanced at the young man. This gaze was calm and reassuring, filled with kindness and power. Wen Jue saw his old friend in this moment, and the forgotten story of the young man he'd lost contact with once again retold itself silently. Wen Jue knew that man was Bai Shuo, and felt warmth in his heart. His nose also grew itchy.

The guards sent Shen Liufei off to the main surgery room, leaving only Wen Jue and the man in black. The man was at least half a head taller than Wen Jue, well-built, and tan; his rough features also made him look menacing. He spoke a little Chinese and gave some orders to Wen Jue about the slaves. The two spoke in a mix of English and Chinese that confused both parties, then he noticed Wen Jue's slowness and quickly lost his patience. He complained about a-Liang being too lazy, and that he must be gambling while high again if he was sending off a useless pawn to do the job instead.

As the man complained while taking out a cigarette from his pocket, Wen Jue heard a voice not too far away. After careful listening, he recognized it was a young girl's voice crying for help in Chinese.

Help me.

Wen Jue was stunned to hear a fellow Mandarin speaker under these circumstances. He quickly turned to take the lighter from the man's hand, then pretended to show admiration as he respectfully helped light the man's cigarette. He called the man in the suit "boss" and asked in English, "Is there anyone else locked up here?"

This praise worked on the man in black. He responded as he blew out a cloud of smoke that they had pulled two virgin girls from the Morphia Club. However, Mr. Zhong was still waiting to have his heart transplant and no longer had the energy to play around with the girls.

Withstanding the awful smell from the man's mouth, Wen Jue leaned in and mustered up his courage to ask if he could be taken to go see the girls as well.

"See them for what?" The man was a bit irritated and gave a cruel response, "Don't forget to deliver the message I asked. There's nothing else for you here. Now get lost."

“Huh, hey...” Wen Jue took a few steps back and suddenly noticed something from the corner of his eyes. He saw a dragon-shaped ceramic on a display; the item was well polished, and the carvings depicting its hair were so realistic it was almost ghoulish.

He remembered the last look Shen Liufei had given him before they parted. The cowardly celebrity suddenly gathered courage and pulled the ceramic sculpture up, then slammed it hard right on the man’s head.

The man dropped to the ground the next moment. He was knocked out, and even Wen Jue was surprised it worked.

He checked the man’s breathing and confirmed he was still alive, just unconscious, and quickly searched the man’s clothing. He went through all the pockets, taking out a cell phone and some keys.

The cry for help rang out again. If he were his past self, Wen Jue would have run away as far as he could right now and pretended he’d heard nothing. But now he felt a rush of adrenaline inside him like the main character in a Wuxia novel who was filled with power. He wanted to save the person crying for help.

He followed the sound and found a room that housed a large cage. Inside that were two young women who looked to be only teenagers.

The girls were tied up and dressed in fancy saris, one in red and one in green. Shiny gold accessories also covered the girls from head to toe like they were performers. Wen Jue quickly pulled out the key as soon as he saw them and attempted to open the cage.

One of the girls dressed in red leaned forward behind the cage bars and stared at the young man in front of her. The face outside the cage was ethereal and looked like something that could only exist in a comic; his features were delicate and refined, those big eyes and slightly grayish-green pupils gave him an even dreamier image.

She finally recognized him. While still tied up, the girl banged on the cage bars and called out, “Oh my God I can’t believe I’m seeing you in person. You’re Wen Jue, right? You must be Wen Jue!”

This girl was the first person who’d recognized him after being sold off in a foreign land. Wen Jue was deeply moved by this familiar call and almost broke out in tears on the spot.

Am I really not that famous? He thought. He had thought countless times after being whipped, tortured, and starved: *I must give Han Guangming a good scolding after I return. The old man better watch out and pay more attention to my likes and follows. I didn’t even know that I was so unknown that my fanbase hasn’t even made it across the continent of Asia yet. I can’t believe nobody here recognized me!*

The girl in red must have gone through a tough time as well after being traded and sold off in a foreign land; her cheeks sank visibly but her spirits were still quite high. Seeing the young man outside the cage tacitly admit he was indeed Wen Jue, the girl quickly introduced herself gleefully and said, “My name’s Tang Xiaomo, I’m your

fan. I know the lyrics to all of your songs. I'm a really, really big fan—"

"All right, all right, I love you too..." Wen Jue lowered his head to open the lock as he half-heartedly responded. When the lock finally opened, he let out a small sigh of relief and then suddenly recalled, "Your name sounds kind of familiar..."

Unsure if there would be other guards chasing after them, the three quickly analyzed their situation and stopped wasting time on celebrity worship. They knew there were a handful of guards waiting outside, so after sneaking up and knocking the one closest to the door out, they escaped the room.

As the evening fog descended silently on the forest, the runaways were unsure where to run. Wen Jue recalled what Shen Liufei told him and pulled the cell phone he had stolen from the man in black earlier and dialed a number.

Tang Xiaomo stared at him and asked, "Who are you calling?"

"China's country call code is 86, right..." Wen Jue didn't answer the question directly and continued dialing the number, acting confident in what he was doing.

The call finally connected after three different number attempts. A "hello" rang up from the other end, and the celebrity said courteously, "Hello, I'm Wen Jue. I was kidnapped while filming for a reality show in Thailand and I'm stuck in the mountains with another Chinese girl—"

An irritated voice suddenly interrupted from the other line, cursing, "Bullshit! If you think you're Wen Jue, I must be veteran actor Hugh Hu!"

The call hung up.

The police had been active in educating the masses on how to deal with unsolicited calls, so obviously, no one would believe a word from a call like this. Tang Xiaomo grew more puzzled and finally asked, "Why are you making yourself sound like a scammer...?"

"The guy that saved me, my bro Shen, told me that we can't call the local cops here because there might be moles in the bureau. So I thought maybe we could do it in a roundabout way and ask someone back home to call the cops for us first, then let the police in China contact the embassy here and send someone out to save us..." Wen Jue stared back at Tang Xiaomo, confusion written all over his face. He didn't think he'd done anything wrong.

Tang Xiaomo was shocked by this naïve thinking from the sheltered young man; she rolled her eyes dramatically and said, "Can't you just call 110?!"

Before they could dial another number, a car appeared within the fog. Its intense headlights were like massive eyes in the dark that locked in on them.

The three screamed and ran, knowing that they had already been found.

Of course, human legs couldn't outrun a car, and it quickly caught up to them. The other girl, who had been locked in the cage with Tang Xiaomo, disappeared. Perhaps she had tripped and fallen, but she was left behind as they fled.

The car stopped in front of them, and two figures came out. Judging from the silhouettes in the mist, they both seemed to carry guns.

Wen Jue and Tang Xiaomo dropped to the ground in fear. They had no energy left to fight back.

An individual walked toward them. Afraid that they would be silenced, Wen Jue covered Tang Xiaomo's eyes with one hand and held up another before his face to cry out loud.

He didn't care about his image right now and yelled desperately with the girl beside him, "Don't kill me, please don't kill me... I can tell my manager to give you however much money you want. I'm a celebrity in China, I'm famous there..."

Tang Xiaomo also cried, both in Chinese and English in fear that she wouldn't be understood, "He's really famous and has a lot of money..."

The young man who walked up to the two crying hostages gave a cheerful laugh at how scared the two were. He then said in clear Mandarin to them that sounded like a blessing from heaven:

"I'm Ling Yun from the Blue Fox. You guys are safe now."

(iv)

Zhong Zhuohai was lying on the surgical bed, and Shen Liufei was scheduled for a blood test to ensure he was safe for the implant right before being sent in.

It wasn't difficult for a man like him to bring an entire surgical room into his mansion, and Shen Liufei was also quite familiar with this scene—he had also once been through a surgery performed by Duan Licheng in his own mansion in the past.

The guards couldn't follow them into the sterilized surgical room. Shen Liufei only saw a doctor in a white lab coat and face mask walk up to him, reaching a hand out to roll up his sleeve for the blood test.

At that moment, the hostage quickly broke out of the already loose rope tying his hands together, and jumped up. Before the doctor could react, he quickly grabbed the doctor's arm with one hand and choked his neck with the other.

Noticing a commotion inside, the guard barged into the room and fired rounds of bullets at Shen Liufei, but he had already hidden behind the doctor, using the poor man as a human shield to block the bullets.

After tossing the dead doctor onto the floor, Shen Liufei dropped to the ground and dodged a second barrage, then rushed right into the main surgery room.

Three surgeons surrounded the surgical bed, all covered in medical gear and face masks. Judging by the exposed features above the masks, it was one white man and two Asian surgeons. Their eyes were wide with shock as soon as they saw Shen Liufei run in. One of them called out in English, "Get out!"

Shen Liufei kicked two men down without a word. The last one standing rushed out the door in a panic, right into the guard who was chasing after the runaway.

An old man drowsily lay on the surgical bed; his clothes were already changed, as he was ready to accept a life-changing heart surgery. Shen Liufei walked toward the

old man and took out the knife he had hidden in his sleeve. As if still insisting on paying respects in this dangerous situation, he gave a small bow to the frightened old man and courteously said, "My apologies."

The next instant, he pulled the old man up from the surgical bed, one hand on the old man's neck, and dragged the patient before him like a shield. Shen Liufei held the old man up against the guards attempting to attack.

With their boss being held hostage, the guards had no choice but to hold their hands and guns up as they slowly backed away.

Shen Liufei pressed his knife to Zhong Zhuohai's neck and took careful steps forward until he left the surgery room and disappeared down the end of the empty hallway.

He was still a lone prey in a den of lions and couldn't afford to let his guard down. Shen Liufei could only keep his eyes on the guards around him and didn't notice another killer in the dark was closing in from behind.

The killer had a gun in his hand, ready to shoot down Shen Liufei as soon as the young man passed the dead-end corner of the wall.

One more step, just one more step back, and his head would have been exposed to the would-be killer's shooting range.

Bang!

Shen Liufei turned his head back in time and saw Xie Lanshan standing behind him with a gun in hand. The killer hiding in the shadows took a direct hit to his head and dropped to the ground. His skull cracked open like a fresh watermelon.

Xie Lanshan smiled after a brief exchange of glances and said, "It's not time to be sentimental, cuz."

He leaned down to pick up the gun the killer had abandoned and handed it to Shen Liufei. The two men got up and stood back-to-back in the hallway.

"When did you sneak in?" Now that he gave his back to a trusted comrade, Shen Liufei focused all of his attention on dealing with the enemies before him.

"Just now," Xie Lanshan said with a hint of pride in his tone. "This place only looks well guarded to outsiders, but it's a piece of cake to me."

"Let's get out of here," Shen Liufei said calmly.

"I don't wanna." Xie Lanshan somehow found the energy to bargain during a life-and-death situation and said, "I just saved your life earlier. Tell me how you're gonna thank me first, hm?"

"What are you expecting?"

"Let's go with the good ol' method. How about you offer your body to me?"

Shen Liufei was about to answer when Zhong Zhuohai, who was still being held hostage by him, suddenly shook as he held a hand to his chest. In the highly intense situation, the old man's heart was acting up. If he were to die right at this point without immediate medical attention, the two men would immediately be shot dead on the spot by their pursuing guards.

The guards in suits took another step forward. Before Shen Liufei could answer, Xie Lanshan violently grabbed Zhong Zhuohai's throat and whispered into the old man's ears, "Get us a car ready and send your men down."

The old man panted heavily as he held a hand up. The suited men all took a few steps back.

Despite having a hostage in hand, the health of the hostage was too difficult to handle. Neither man wanted to take on the entire crowd right now and murder their way out; they simply wanted to escape as soon as possible. Shen Liufei and Xie Lanshan remained in the same position with their backs against each other, their muscles tense and twitching in high alert. They carefully and slowly stepped toward the door. A sniper hiding on a higher level was ready to hold up a gun to shoot, but Xie Lanshan noticed first and shot the sniper down.

With another man dead, the air in the mansion grew even graver. Just as the guards were about to make a move, a police siren blared from outside and a group of policemen armed with weapons barged into the establishment.

Leading the team were Chi Jin, Ling Yun, and Somsak. They'd contacted the Thai police after they successfully rescued Wen Jue and Tang Xiaomo. Somsak kept his promise with Xie Lanshan and didn't notify anyone before the operation, in fear of alerting the enemy. However, the old cop insisted on joining the infiltration. This was still Thailand, and even as members of the Blue Fox, neither Chi Jin nor Ling Yun had the authority to act independently here.

In the end, the snipers and killers inside the mansion were all cleaned up, and Zhong Zhuohai died of a spontaneous heart attack while he was in the ambulance.

Xie Lanshan was not supposed to have the right to hold and fire a gun, so it was quite difficult to explain the two lives he'd taken. Thanks to Somsak, he was let off the hook in the name of self-defense during an intense situation.

"What about the two murder cases?" Back in the bureau, branch Chief Kang Tai asked in his office. He'd lost some weight and looked much different from his brother, Kang Xin, now. The pressure from Guan Nuoqin had clearly taken a toll on him.

"The initial report showed that it was part of an internal conflict within the trafficking organizations. Gold Tooth killed Anuchit and then someone else killed Gold Tooth..."

"Who killed *him* then?"

"That... we're still investigating..." Somsak knew what his boss meant and didn't dare to explain further.

Kang Tai knew he was being kept in the dark. Some people followed him loyally in the bureau, but not everyone was on the branch chief's side. He didn't think someone like Somsak would refuse to tell the truth and join forces with someone else, yet with an eye above him and excited subordinates below, he couldn't make a move right now. He simply listened to the report half-heartedly. In his mind, he was already planning on using Gold Tooth's death to ruin the career of the Chinese cop Xie

Lanshan.

After recording all witness accounts and completing the final clean-up, the crew had already spent an entire night in the bureau. They were let out of the police department at dawn.

Wen Jue and Tang Xiaomo were the first to get out of the police car. The two young people of similar ages had been through life and death together and naturally felt a sense of kinship. They held each other's hands as if to support one another when they got in the car. Bangkok's weather was still humid and hot during this time, so their palms were covered in sweat, yet they refused to let go of each other's hand, even after getting out of the vehicle.

Han Guangming had received the news from the police and waited in front of the hotel lobby. He first noticed Tang Xiaomo and then saw whose hand she held. The manager already was rather round in appearance, and after crying a whole night until his eyes puffed into a walnut, it almost looked as if two balls of flesh had grown on his face.

Han Guangming rushed forward as soon as he saw the two; Tang Xiaomo thought the man was going to hug her and dodged in shock, but Han Guangming grabbed onto Wen Jue and started crying out loud again. He cried without restraint and genuinely from the heart. The same lines came out of his trembling lips, "I won't leave you anymore, I'll repay you for everything I've done..."

Of course, there was nothing to repay in their celebrity-manager relationship, but even if he wasn't being literal, these heartfelt words moved the eyes of everyone watching. Wen Jue was warmed at first until he began feeling disgusted by the tears and snot.

"O-okay, that's enough... look, I'm back safe now..." He gave a reassuring pat on the man's large back, but Han Guangming still didn't let him go. Wen Jue felt like he was suffocating and became irritated. He shoved Han Guangming aside and lightly slapped the man's face. "Stop crying, that's enough!"

Of course, it wasn't a truly hard slap, and just a joking gesture. The celebrity had learned to be more reserved and forgiving over the last few days. These frightening times made him realize that life under the sun was heaven compared to other places, and that he should be grateful for what he had.

Han Guangming closed his mouth, but a whimper still rolled out from his throat. He trembled and panted to hold himself back, like an ox catching its breath.

The surrounding people watched and laughed slightly at this comedic scene.

As an artist, Shen Liufei had a keen eye for detail and an exceptional memory. He turned to look at Han Guangming and frowned slightly at the man.

The man looked awfully familiar. He was almost certain he'd seen him before.

Xie Lanshan sat in another corner of the hotel with a translucent red cloth in hand. He waited until the sun was about to set before seeing Shen Liufei once again.

The two couldn't spare a moment to think about anything else the day before in the face of death. Now that they were both safe, the atmosphere finally grew a little awkward. Xie Lanshan hung his head back a little and watched Shen Liufei walk over against a backdrop of deep crimson. He squinted slightly but didn't get up to greet the man.

Shen Liufei noticed the red satin cloth in Xie Lanshan's hand and asked, "Whose is that?"

The cloth was covered with a unique scent that smelled a little like some sort of rosemary mix. Xie Lanshan smiled and said, "Tang Xiaomo's. They forced her to wear a dancer's outfit while in the Morphia Club and she somehow kept the clothes."

Shen Liufei asked, "Where is she at?"

Xie Lanshan put on a disappointed expression and said, "You know how women are, she's off with that pretty boy Wen."

Xie Lanshan was in the mood to chat after finally meeting up with his old friend in this foreign land, but Tang Xiaomo clearly hadn't been interested. She took off the sari that she wore when the two ran into each other in the hotel and shoved the clothes at Xie Lanshan. Then, she called out, "Talk to ya later," while she ran off to go play with Wen Jue and Han Guangming.

Shen Liufei sat beside Xie Lanshan without a word. He seemed to have only kept a little peace in his mind, hoping to spend some time admiring the romantic and beautiful scenery of this country.

Xie Lanshan didn't speak and looked out into the distance; the setting sun was like a blazing ball of fire on desert land, slowly disappearing after it had proudly burned.

They sat for a while until Xie Lanshan finally confessed, "Song Qilian told me the truth, and I think I remember everything now."

This wasn't a traditional fairy-tale story, so of course it wouldn't have a typical ending. The entire relationship they had built over solving the cases in the past now sounded like a joke; every scene that ran in his mind was like a blade that slashed deeply into his flesh.

It was almost laughable the more he thought about it. Xie Lanshan shook his head and asked, "You hate me, right?"

Shen Liufei didn't explain further and only nodded. "Yes."

The last ray of sunlight was too bright to look at. Xie Lanshan lowered his head and added, in one last desperate plea, "But you also love me, right?"

Shen Liufei didn't give an answer and simply turned around to look at Xie Lanshan. Suddenly, he reached out a hand and popped the red satin out of Xie Lanshan's hand into the air. The satin exploded like a cloud of red smoke in his palm as it floated down, then he grabbed onto the ends and covered Xie Lanshan's face behind it.

The red satin was more translucent than the setting sun right now. Xie Lanshan's face was still visible behind this thin layer of cloth. His eyes were wide open, his

expression both shocked and puzzled.

Shen Liufei stood up and bent down before Xie Lanshan until their eyes were level. Xie Lanshan also stared back at the man. Behind the cold expression, those eyes were like a burning furnace; flames of love and hatred danced within them as they smelted all other emotions.

Finally, he saw a faint smile on Shen Liufei's face. It wasn't a heart-throbbing smile, but it was like a small beam of light within the darkness.

"You said you would take my body and I accept your offer now." Shen Liufei held up another hand and pulled up the red satin covering Xie Lanshan's face, then said softly, "I affirm my love for you, my bride."

Buddhism was popular in Thailand, and because their hotel was near popular tourist attractions, a grandiose golden statue of Buddha could be seen watching over the mortal world from outside their windows.

"Cuz," Xie Lanshan called. He wasn't religious or superstitious, but even he admitted it was slightly unnerving to see this giant statue right outside the window. He remarked half-heartedly and half in reverence, "We're probably going to hell for doing it in front of Buddha."

Xie Lanshan had already taken in half of Shen Liufei, and the latter also glanced outside the window at Xie Lanshan's words. The moonlight illuminated the golden icon, making the statue seem almost threatening and stern.

Shen Liufei nodded in acknowledgment. Then, as if agreeing with Xie Lanshan's theory about being damned, he spread his lover's legs wider and forced himself in until he was fully enveloped in warmth.

Xie Lanshan felt a tingling sensation the moment his sweet spot was hit, releasing all sorts of emotions and a moan of satisfaction. His legs instinctively wrapped around Shen Liufei's waist.

"But I'm already in heaven right now," Shen Liufei remarked expressionlessly. Xie Lanshan was warm and soft inside; this was the body he had yearned to have for so long. His fingers slid down to Xie Lanshan's lower body, gently feeling every bit of his tall cock until his hand landed at the place where their bodies connected. He forced another finger into the hole that was already filled with his desire, searching deep inside. He said, "This is where I stray from morality but it also is my road to heaven."

Xie Lanshan's face burned up; his lover always said the most passionate words despite his cold demeanor, catching Xie Lanshan off guard. He lifted his head up and exchanged a kiss with Shen Liufei.

The long kiss ended with Xie Lanshan playfully biting on his lover's lip as he whispered, "Then go fuck your heaven."

The Shen Liufei he knew was always restrained, suppressed, and even a bit mellow. Even when they shared the most intimate space, an invisible wall always seemed to be between them, but today was different. Shen Liufei was more

aggressive, pushing their limits like an unsatiated beast, grabbing tightly onto Xie Lanshan's buttocks as if trying to force his whole body inside the man.

They kissed as they made love, from gentle pecks to invasive make outs that swallowed each other's mouths. Just before the climax, Xie Lanshan heard Shen Liufei whisper into his ear, "I'm glad that I was there for every stage of your life so far."

Xie Lanshan didn't understand those words nor did he have time to contemplate. Shen Liufei grabbed onto his ankles at that moment and sped up his thrusting. The man was out of control today, experimenting with different angles inside him, forcing Xie Lanshan's voice to grow hoarse.

And finally, they came together in an embrace.

"Xie Lanshan." Shen Liufei didn't hurry to exit after coming inside his lover, allowing their bodies to remain connected. He lowered his head and kissed Xie Lanshan, asking, "Come with me, please."

"What... what do you mean?" They exchanged more kisses as they bathed in the lingering sensation after orgasm. Xie Lanshan stared dumbly at Shen Liufei, his body feeling like jelly.

"You can't stay here anymore, whether it's the bureau or Blue Fox. There's no place for you anywhere. Come with me to the States, or somewhere else, and let's start fresh."

Xie Lanshan knew that he was in a tough spot. Gold Tooth died as soon as he left the storage and he knew that was a hard one to get out of. The added identity of Ye Shen also complicated everything; one mistake and he could find himself at gunpoint any minute. Yet even then, he had not once thought about betraying his promise to his father, throwing away his responsibilities, or leaving his home country.

Almost without hesitation, Xie Lanshan responded, "But I'm a cop."

Shen Liufei seemed to have expected this answer and didn't force the conversation further. He only felt his lower body heat up again as Xie Lanshan turned and began slowly moving once more.

Xie Lanshan knew he might've upset the man. Feeling satisfied behind but not enough in front, he pulled Shen Liufei's hand toward his cock and said flirtatiously, "Hey, cuz, junior here wants some attention too."

Shen Liufei's finger brushed against the small hole on top as he leaned down to give Xie Lanshan another kiss, deepening it with every second and forcing his way inside with his tongue.

(v)

The night was still long and the two men weren't in a rush for round two in their room. They merely lay in bed and kissed, all while feeling each other's bodies. Sounds of chatter rang outside the door; the walls weren't that thick in the hotel and

Xie Lanshan could make out it was Tang Xiaomo's voice. He glanced at the clock and noticed it was already 1:30 A.M. *This girl sure has a big heart*, he thought. For someone who had just escaped the reaper's scythe, she was already back in vacation mode with someone she'd just met.

Still worried, Xie Lanshan got off the bed, wrapped a towel around his waist and walked toward the door.

He opened it and looked in the direction of the noise.

Shen Liufei also got off the bed in a hotel sleeping gown, then made his way next to Xie Lanshan.

Tang Xiaomo was on the same floor as them. She had just gotten back from touring town with Wen Jue. Han Guangming followed behind the two with luggage in hand. The old manager was nodding along and bowing slightly as he handed some souvenirs and gifts to Tang Xiaomo.

Shen Liufei's eyes lit up at this gesture, then he quickly frowned and said, "I remember now, I *have* seen this man before."

He was referring to Han Guangming. It had been only a few months since Shen Liufei returned to China and he paid little attention to local celebrity gossip. Even as well-known as Han Guangming was, he was still only a manager and never really showed his own face in public.

Shen Liufei recognized him because he was the same shabbily dressed old man who'd bought fake paintings from Tang Xiaomo at the antique market once.

With this reminder, Xie Lanshan also remembered. The painting had been a copy of Wu Changshuo's red plums, which had ended up in the house of branch Chief Liu Yanbo.

"You said Han Guangming was with you the day Gold Tooth died?" Shen Liufei had already gotten all the details about the night Xie Lanshan had left the storage unit. The victim inside died soon after Xie Lanshan left, and if they couldn't find the true culprit, the young cop would once again be accused as the murderer.

"Now that you mention it, I do remember something." His heart had been searching for Shen Liufei ever since coming to Thailand and he hadn't paid much attention to his own surroundings. Now that he'd achieved his initial goal, something felt suspicious about this whole event. After pondering for a moment, Xie Lanshan said, "Han Guangming had been following me everywhere these last few days, mostly into hostess bars in the red-light district. It's almost like finding Wen Jue wasn't his priority."

"His reaction when he saw Wen Jue was also quite abnormal." A normal manager wouldn't have such a strong bond with a celebrity that they would offer personal repayment or anything beyond a business relationship. Shen Liufei recalled and said, "Tang Xiaomo told me before that she felt like she was being followed. I assumed that she was being followed by Anuchit after arriving in Thailand, but now that I think about it, perhaps it was someone else."

“But why would he want to kill Gold Tooth?” Xie Lanshan didn’t quite understand. Gold Tooth now followed Guan Nuoqin of the Golden Triangle, which had nothing to do with a celebrity manager like Han Guangming.

There was no answer, so he stopped thinking. Now that Shen Liufei was back by his side, Xie Lanshan was finally at peace and happy. Even if he was still a murder suspect right now, he didn’t feel threatened by the situation.

“We’ve tied things up for today. Every second of our first night is golden. Hey, cuz, wait no...” Xie Lanshan spoke in a high-pitched voice similar to a Chinese opera singer and lifted an eyebrow playfully, then pulled the blanket on the bed up and covered both men inside. He sat with his legs wrapped around Shen Liufei’s waist as he chuckled. “My husband.”

It was a joyful reunion and new marriage, so even without the traditional auspicious dates and fancy ceremonial procedures, the two embraced each other tirelessly and passionately for the entire night. Xie Lanshan slept until the sun was over his head and noticed Shen Liufei had already left the bed. He stretched in satisfaction; his waist and back ached as if his whole body had been taken apart and put back together. Yet despite the pain, this was the first time he’d felt such comfort and security inside him.

The sun was hanging proudly above their heads outside, that golden Buddha statue shimmered with vitality under the light, creating a halo on its head. The bedsheets were stained from bodily fluids, which embarrassed even Xie Lanshan. He quickly turned to the statue outside, clapped his hands together, and muttered, “Please forgive us.”

Of course, the apology wasn’t made with sincerity.

He got up to take a cold shower to wake himself up, then left the hotel room after cleaning up.

The self-serve breakfast in the hotel ended at 10 A.M. Xie Lanshan figured he could snatch some food and look for Shen Liufei at the cafeteria.

As expected, the artist was indeed there—to find someone.

Wen Jue also woke up late that morning after staying out the previous night. The young celebrity was dumbly staring at his plate full of food. He had eaten too much last night without thought, and now that he’d finally come back to his senses, he remembered he needed to count his calories.

The buffet at the hotel was mostly Western-style. The young celebrity came too late and saw only some bread, salad, bacon, and eggs left. The Chinese-style cold stir-fry dishes were also almost gone, with only bamboo shoots, radish, and broccoli left. Nothing was very appetizing upon first glance.

Wen Jue looked up to see Shen Liufei and instinctively called him “Bai Shuo,” but quickly realized he’d called the wrong name and corrected himself, “Shen, bro.”

Shen Liufei didn’t mind that the young celebrity stood awkwardly before him and scanned his surroundings before asking, “Where’s Manager Han?”

“Oh, him,” Wen Jue said as he served himself a plateful of fresh salad. Unwilling to only eat leaves, he placed a Spanish omelet on his plate as well. “Xiaomo said she wanted to have Hong Kong-style breakfast, so he went off to buy food for her from a restaurant in Chinatown.”

Chinatown wasn’t too far from the hotel, but it was a tourist hotspot with a lot of traffic. Realizing this was a rare chance to speak with the young man individually, Shen Liufei also grabbed a plate and served himself some breakfast food as he asked, “So, you must know your manager quite well, right?”

Wen Jue said as the two sat down in the cafeteria, “I’ve known him since I was nineteen, so I guess you can say that.”

After some small talk, Shen Liufei jumped right into his point after realizing he wasn’t in the mood to eat. “Do you know if he has any family?”

“I think he mentioned once that he has a daughter. What’s her name again?” Wen Jue thought as he munched on his food. He could feel the name at the tip of his tongue but couldn’t recall it exactly. After a while, he finally said, “Either way, she was abandoned when she was very young and I don’t think he ever had the intention of finding her later.”

Shen Liufei frowned slightly and pondered before asking, “How much more do you know about Han Guangming? For example, do you know what his job was before he became your manager?”

“That I’m not sure.” One omelet wasn’t enough to fill Wen Jue’s stomach as he glanced back at the food, debating if he wanted to give up his reputation and grab another serving. He then said, “But I do know that he was a chemistry major in university. It was a complete accident that he ended up getting a job in a completely unrelated field...”

Speak of the devil, Han Guangming returned with Tang Xiaomo’s order and called Wen Jue’s name from afar.

Shen Liufei also looked up to search for the manager only to see Xie Lanshan walking toward him.

“Our schedule is also full today, I’m gonna head out first.” Wen Jue stood up and got ready to leave, then stopped after a few steps and stared back at Shen Liufei, “Bai... Shen, bro, I’m very happy to see you again.”

Xie Lanshan walked past Wen Jue and took the seat the young celebrity had sat in earlier. He noticed the subtle change of Wen Jue’s expression; the young man’s gaze toward Shen Liufei was filled with adoration. Xie Lanshan taunted him, “This pretty boy seems to admire you a lot.”

“You’re serving yourself some vinegar on an empty stomach right now.” Shen Liufei didn’t touch any of the food on his plate, and after realizing that Xie Lanshan hadn’t eaten, he placed an omelet onto a plate of beef salad and slid it toward Xie Lanshan.

“You spoil me.” Xie Lanshan gave a pretty and flirtatious smile before quickly downing the food on his plate. “What did you find out?”

Shen Liufei said, “Han Guangming graduated with a degree in chemistry and has a daughter he abandoned when she was little.”

This simple line gave Xie Lanshan an epiphany and bold guess. He asked, “Are you saying... Tang Xiaomo is his daughter?”

This theory cleared the fog in his mind. Xie Lanshan continued, “This explains why he didn’t follow the Blue Fox to find Wen Jue and instead kept clinging to me to find Tang Xiaomo.”

Shen Liufei nodded in agreement. “The plum painting Tang Zhaozhong replicated purposely left a visible mistake. Anyone who is familiar with calligraphy art knows this replica isn’t worth the price, yet Han Guangming chose to offer a huge sum of money without hesitation. Perhaps he wasn’t in a position to expose himself and could only use this method to help support his daughter financially.”

Xie Lanshan attempted to trace back the cases to find Han Guangming’s criminal motive. He twirled the fork in his hand instinctively as he mumbled in thought, “Tang Xiaomo’s kidnapper was Anuchit, and Gold Tooth is only just a proxy in the trade, so if he committed murder out of revenge for his daughter...”

Shen Liufei gave his perspective, “Perhaps Gold Tooth wasn’t the only one he killed.”

“You’re saying that he also killed Anuchit?” The two understood each other well enough that no further explanation was needed to come to the same conclusion. Xie Lanshan recalled the night he met with Gold Tooth that the latter never admitted he’d killed Anuchit. This directed him to consider all the missed details of the case; Xie Lanshan tapped on his temples as he recited some numbers, “19... 84... 7... 91... 53...”

Shen Liufei asked, puzzled, “What does that mean?”

“Kay Ponpai, K. Ponpai.” Xie Lanshan found an answer and said with a confident smile on his face, “Gold Tooth’s new name can also be left in code with chemical elements in a dying message. If Gold Tooth really killed Anuchit, the victim wouldn’t need to leave a cryptic message that expands the pool of suspects. He could have just left the culprit’s name instead of writing the name of the bar the culprit worked at.”

Shen Liufei followed up, “Anuchit left a dying message at the crime scene, but the culprit wanted to lead the police to Sin House to save his daughter, so he decided at the last minute to change the numbers on the abacus.”

“It would require seven sets of numbers to spell out Gold Tooth’s name, but you only need six to spell out the word house,” Xie Lanshan nodded and said. “That’s why the culprit took apart a piece of the abacus, which explains why an extra abacus bead was left in Anuchit’s room.”

“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.” With deduction, the answer surfaced. The key to solving the puzzle fit comfortably in the lock of mystery. Shen Liufei said, “In the

fifteen minutes between the time Anuchit was killed at 9 P.M. and when his neighbor called the cops at 9:15 P.M., three men entered the house. Time was limited. It would be impossible to connect those numbers Anuchit left on the abacus to chemical element symbols. However, that would be a different story if the culprit had a background in chemistry.”

Alas, strong evidence was still necessary to settle the case.

While the two pondered silently as breakfast time concluded, a handful of men in police uniforms suddenly appeared in the closing cafeteria. In front stood two familiar faces: Somsak and Kang Xin. They were here under branch Chief Kang Tai’s order to arrest criminal suspect Xie Lanshan.

Knowing that the cops were here for him, Xie Lanshan reveled in another bite of egg. He squinted slightly as he chewed and gave Shen Liufei another smile. “Egg’s not as good as your cooking, cuz.”

Shen Liufei sat calmly and took a sip of his coffee, then said, “If you let me do it, I can cook for you every day when we return.”

“Every day? You sure you can?” Xie Lanshan teased as he instinctively tightened his bottom. Last night was a little too exciting, he could still feel the aching in his hole.

“You tell me, was last night good enough?”

Watching the two still flirting and nonchalantly eating breakfast, Somsak and Kang Tai grew grave as they tightly gripped the guns in their hands. They both knew that this cop from China wouldn’t be easy to capture.

After finishing the last bit of the egg, Xie Lanshan stood up. In the face of the nervous and hostile Thai police, he carefully fixed his shirt collar and cuffs. Xie Lanshan squinted his eyes in satisfaction like a satiated cat.

“I know who the true culprit is,” he said with a grin, as if he wasn’t ready to be arrested. “But I’ll need you all to help put on an act with me in order to arrest the guy.”

(vi)

The Thai police asked Anuchit’s neighbor to help identify the man’s voice heard during the night of the crime. The neighbor had peeked outside the door that night, and while they couldn’t see the person inside because of the curtains, the voices of two men were clear.

Xie Lanshan was tall. The curtains hanging by the window weren’t high enough to cover his face. After checking with the neighbor to confirm Xie Lanshan wasn’t the man who’d paid Anuchit a visit that night, they finally removed him from the suspect list.

But that wasn’t enough. He was still a suspect of Gold Tooth’s murder. After Somsak had left the man, Xie Lanshan had stayed with Han Guangming for a few

days during the dangerous times, creating a strange bond between the two. He didn't go back to find Shen Liufei in the hotel and instead detoured to check out Han Guangming's room.

The manager came to find Wen Jue with loads of cash on hand. Thailand was hot and the manager changed out of his clothing as quickly as using tissues, but the sole item he carried with him wherever he went was a black-and-yellow Hermès brand waist bag. Xie Lanshan reached out and played around with it.

"Hey, you, hands off, don't touch my stuff." Han Guangming turned around and took the bag away to carry it around his waist. He said, "I'm going back tomorrow with my li'l Jue and Xiaomo. Southeast Asia sure can be dangerous. I won't let them come next time."

The way he said "Xiaomo" was filled with affection. Xie Lanshan faintly smiled and said to the man, "Anuchit and Gold Tooth belong to the same criminal organization, and because of how close their time of deaths are, the Thai police suspect the same person committed their murders. You'll need to follow me to the bureau as a witness."

Surprised that he was now a suspect, Han Guangming asked in shock, "Me too? Why do I have to go?"

Xie Lanshan responded confidently, "Of course you have to go. You and I both were at the crime scene when Gold Tooth was killed; not to mention you left later than I did."

"I did not!" Han Guangming took in a deep breath of air in shock and explained as he attempted to calm himself down, "You were the one who dropped all those photos and stuff on the ground. I was just helping you clean up!"

"I know, I know." Xie Lanshan wrapped an arm around the man's shoulders and led him out the door. Then, just like how they roleplayed a couple at the club last time, he joked, "My wife sure needs to be a bit more alert. These dumb Thai police are too busy trying to settle the case that they're trying to drag us poor souls down."

Han Guangming was concerned for his own safety now and shoved Xie Lanshan's hand away in disgust, then scolded him, "Who's your wife? That's disgusting!"

Xie Lanshan continued to jest and squeezed Han Guangming's cheeks, playfully calling the man "fat lady" despite the manager's resistance.

Xie Lanshan wasted no time and took Han Guangming to the police station in the warm sun and through the blooming streets of Bangkok. The popular tourist city was peaceful and tranquil beneath the sun.

Stepping into a foreign country's police department for the first time, and as a criminal suspect, Han Guangming could feel himself losing some touch with reality. He dragged himself to follow Xie Lanshan, occasionally scanning his surroundings sheepishly. All the cops working hard around him would lift their heads and glare at him harshly whenever they walked near. He had grown used to seeing Wen Jue's pretty face every day, so he was naturally put-off by the unfamiliar strangers' faces

around him right now. He felt like the Southeast Asians all seemed to carry a cloud of suspicion on their faces like ferocious statues in a temple, sending chills down his spine.

Of course, it could also be that Han Guangming felt guilty.

There were two policemen in the bureau conversing loudly, pulling everyone's attention toward them. Han Guangming remembered the taller and more handsome one was called Kang Xin, but he didn't recognize the shorter man. Both men looked stern as they discussed something in Thai. Han Guangming didn't understand the language, but he could make out that they were talking about Anuchit's case from the fact that they were gesturing toward a photo of the victim's body. He also noticed that one man was holding a wooden stick in hand.

No one would have recognized this item, but Han Guangming knew immediately what it was upon first glance—this was a piece taken off the toy abacus.

In contrast to that eerie Morphia Show clubhouse filled with ambient red lights, Han Guangming felt that the bureau was much more fearsome. The cops here were like standing snakes waiting to capture their prey.

At that moment, Xie Lanshan suddenly leaned by his ear and gave a cryptic message to him, "When I was here yesterday for the investigation, I overheard the cops say the culprit kept the most decisive evidence on them."

Han Guangming shivered and asked, stuttering, "What... what evidence?"

As if afraid to let the cops hear him, Xie Lanshan pulled on Han Guangming's arm and said in a low voice, "Anuchit was afraid he would get killed, so he prepared a dying message in his house beforehand. But for some reason, the culprit ended up changing his message and took something from the item that had the message. That item was taken apart and the cops only found a portion of it in Anuchit's house. They suspect that the culprit didn't throw everything away and kept it on them, and whatever they took must still have Anuchit's fingerprint..."

Han Guangming grew even more restless and asked, "What... what item?"

Just as Xie Lanshan was about to answer, he heard Somsak call him from behind, "You're next." The old cop left after issuing the message.

The anxious atmosphere clouded Han Guangming's memories. As soon as Xie Lanshan left, the manager quickly found a corner and carefully searched his bag. Thankfully, he found one white bead in the bottom of his waist bag before the police could get to him.

In order to distract the police's attention toward Sin House during the night of Anuchit's murder, he had no choice but to quickly change the dying message. He'd taken apart a piece of the abacus but had nowhere else to place those large beads and could only put them into his pocket.

Han Guangming took in a breath of chilling air as he saw this missing piece of evidence and clenched the bead in his hand. He wanted to find an excuse to flush it down the toilet but didn't realize Xie Lanshan had suddenly appeared behind him.

The young cop leaned in by his ear and said, “What do you have there, wife?”

He had no time to toss the bead now. To hide the piece of evidence, Han Guangming’s first instinct was to toss the bead into his mouth and swallow it.

The large bead was stuck in his throat; he couldn’t swallow or spit it out. Han Guangming choked until his eyes rolled, pounding on his chest to get it down his stomach.

“You sure have a big appetite.” Xie Lanshan tried to hold in his laughter as he saw everything was going as planned, then gave the manager’s back a friendly pat and said, “What’s the rush?”

“Uh... um...” After finally managing to swallow it down, Han Guangming panted heavily and responded, “Candy... I was just eating candy.”

(vii)

After an hour-long questioning, Han Guangming quickly ran off to the restroom and sat on the toilet. It was uncomfortable knowing such a large bead was inside his stomach; he needed to release it as soon as possible.

He clenched his teeth on the toilet, his face reddening and legs going numb, until he heard someone knock lightly on the door.

“Wife?” a playful voice rang from outside. “Is my wife in there?”

It was obvious the person behind the door was Xie Lanshan. Han Guangming was still stuck in the stall when he answered in irritation, “What do you want?”

“I dropped something and couldn’t find it anywhere, and then I remembered I think I dropped it in your bag this morning...” Xie Lanshan said as he pinched his nose against the foul smell in the restroom, then asked innocently, “You didn’t happen to eat it, did you?”

Han Guangming felt his heart skip a beat at this question and assumed he’d fallen for a trick. His body stiffened as he attempted to find excuses. “Wh-who would eat your stuff?!”

“If you manage to poop it out, don’t forget to give it back. If you can’t, then don’t waste your time in there.” Not enough time had passed for his stomach to digest anything since he’d swallowed the bead. Xie Lanshan knowingly joked back and said, “What did you even eat this morning? It sure smells like crap in here.”

Xie Lanshan then left as soon as he said the last sentence.

Han Guangming was tired of squatting and pulled himself and his pants back up. After he cleaned himself up and walked out of the restroom, he was greeted by the policemen he had just spoken with earlier. Somsak and the other cop who was talking about the case earlier were also there. Everyone looked at him, their eyebrows furrowed and frowns stern.

Only Xie Lanshan was still smiling at him. Behind those pretty eyes were stars glittering slyly like a fox’s.

“What are you all looking at?” Han Guangming was ready to fight; he was going to insist that he enjoyed eating beads, even if they found it suspicious. Even if it meant they might take the item from his stomach, he wasn’t going to back down—what could they do if he insisted he liked eating strange beads? Were they going to shoot him for that?

Xie Lanshan raised a hand and pointed at the walls in the hallway, chuckling, “Look, there are cameras all over.”

It was obvious that his act of swallowing the bead earlier had been recorded. Han Guangming still didn’t back down and asked with confidence, “So what?”

“Nothing, I just wanna ask you something, darling,” Xie Lanshan continued to speak in that coquettish tone to annoy him. He raised a hand and displayed a bead with two holes on each end in between two fingers. He waved it quickly before Han Guangming’s eyes and said, “Did I leave this in your bag? And what did you just swallow earlier right in front of the camera?”

“Why do you care what I ate? Even if I decide that I like eating abacus beads, that’s my personal preference—”

“W-wait...” Xie Lanshan lifted an eyebrow and then held up the item in his hand before the manager. “I only said I left something in your bag. How did you recognize that it was an abacus bead?”

Han Guangming finally took a good look at the item in the young cop’s hand—it wasn’t the bead left in his bag, it was a rubber bead that toddlers grind their teeth on.

The smile on Xie Lanshan’s face disappeared as he stared sharply at Han Guangming and said quickly, “Because you’ve been to the crime scene. You were also the one who changed Anuchit’s dying message and had no choice but to take away all the extra abacus beads. You were scared that Anuchit’s fingerprints would be left on the bead, so you decided to swallow it at the last minute.”

Han Guangming was panicking, but it wasn’t decisive proof. He saw that the two cops earlier were both glaring at him, and after recalling what Xie Lanshan had said about how these idiot cops wanted to settle the case by pinning the blame on someone random, he quickly came up with an idea.

“Hey, wife.” The words out of Xie Lanshan’s mouth were a joke despite the stern tone. “I only explained that the culprit brought a key piece of evidence with them from the crime scene. I didn’t even mention the part about the abacus. If you don’t have a good explanation right now, I’m afraid you’re going to be the primary suspect. Even your husband won’t be able to save you.”

“I overheard those two cops talk about the case earlier and picked up bits of their conversation, so I knew about the abacus. That’s when I saw something in my bag that didn’t belong to me and suspected someone was trying to put the blame on me. I ended up swallowing the bead in a panic.” Han Guangming stubbornly defended himself and then grabbed Xie Lanshan’s collar, shouting, “You could be the true culprit trying to pin it all on me for all I know!”

“That’s a good explanation. Not only did you clear yourself of suspicion, you even found a scapegoat.” Xie Lanshan pretended to ponder for a little before he stared back in shock, “But I thought you didn’t know Thai?”

“It’s just one or two words, I can at least understand a little bit...” Han Guangming had been spending quite some time in Thailand already and could pick out some easy phrases. He said some very accented words and then insisted on not speaking anymore, then turned his attention back to Xie Lanshan.

The latter looked at Han Guangming, frowning, and asked, “Are you sure they were talking about this case?”

Han Guangming said confidently, “Yes, they were. I heard some words earlier but I forgot the details.”

Xie Lanshan let out a sigh and walked toward Kang Xin. He took out a recorder from the cop’s jacket and turned the time back to when Han Guangming had just stepped into the bureau right in front of everyone. He turned up the volume and made sure everyone could hear the conversation the two had earlier.

Kang Xin was having a stern discussion with his colleague earlier while holding a photo of the crime scene and an abacus stick—about what they were going to eat for dinner.

Despite not knowing Thai, Han Guangming could tell from the expressions of everyone that no one had mentioned a word about this case from start to finish. Only the culprit who had been to the crime scene would know about the abacus, and would be the only person who would possibly attempt to hide this fact.

“I shoved that in your bag just before we left. Anuchit’s fingerprints are not on there. You’ve already disposed of all the evidence, but you had no time to think because your instincts told you to hide the truth.”

Han Guangming refused to speak and glared back; he assumed that silence was better than breaking down in front of the cops.

“There were cameras installed on the streets around the storage unit Gold Tooth was found dead in. All surveillance has already been extracted. I left earlier than you, and the cameras showed that no one else walked into the unit after you left. You’re the only one who had the time to murder the victim, and you’ve also been to the crime scene of Anuchit’s murder. The only thing we’re missing now is a motive...” Xie Lanshan lifted his head suddenly and glanced out the window before saying, “I can arrange a DNA test for you right now.”

Han Guangming followed Xie Lanshan’s gaze and saw that Shen Liufei had taken Tang Xiaomo and Wen Jue out. Perhaps they had this planned beforehand. He saw the three walk closer to them. The young girl and boy held hands as they walked, chatting happily amongst themselves.

Han Guangming’s gaze was fixed on the young girl; he noticed her smile was brilliant, joyous, and shining under the sun.

“N-no...” He finally gave up. A despairing tone came out from his hoarse throat, “Don’t do a DNA test. I don’t want her to know about me.”

The three quickly made their way into the bureau. Tang Xiaomo looked at Xie Lanshan, puzzled. “Did you call us over as witnesses? Where do we go?”

Han Guangming stared at Xie Lanshan desperately, implying that he would confess everything if they gave him space in private.

Three men were left inside the office of the bureau.

Shen Liufei also helped plan this act; he had assumed Han Guangming would refuse to confess, even if they both participated in this performance. Tang Xiaomo and Wen Jue were taken to another office by Somsak. The artist turned to ask Han Guangming, “Is Tang Xiaomo really your daughter?”

Han Guangming looked out the window. The green bushes outside danced in rhythm under the wind, almost as if they were shivering in fear. Perhaps fear was no longer accurate. His heart was now only filled with warm emotions that were slowly opening up after the initial despair.

Xie Lanshan lowered his gaze a little and asked, “You went to Tang Xiaomo’s little shop to buy fake art so you could secretly financially support her, right?”

“I’m not blind or stupid. Do you think an obvious fake painting like that is worth that much?” Han Guangming glanced at Xie Lanshan and then said, “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you everything I know if I can have some booze.”

“One moment,” Shen Liufei knew this was going to be a tragic story and decided to fulfill this angered and despairing father’s final request. He stepped out of the office and quickly came back in with a few bottles of beer. There was only one brand in the nearest shop and no bottle openers. He had to turn the bottle upside down and open one bottle using the force of another.

Shen Liufei swiftly and handsomely handed an open bottle to Han Guangming, then opened another for Xie Lanshan.

“Thank you.” Han Guangming downed a large mouthful before spitting a little toward Shen Liufei in protest. “What kind of booze is this? It’s not even as good as Tsingtao.”

“Huh?” Shen Liufei obviously ran to buy the beer to save time. Xie Lanshan wasn’t too happy that Han Guangming was being picky and shoved the man’s arm with his own beer bottle. “My good cuz here bought you a drink and even opened a bottle for you, don’t get ahead of yourself.”

Of course, the beer wasn’t as bad as he claimed. Han Guangming drank another mouthful and finally began his story.

“I never married her mother; she followed me around until she gave birth to Xiaomo. Later, when my career was finally starting to look good, and I knew I was going to become a successful man, naturally those pretty girls began flocking over like pigeons. I admit that I did lose myself in that dream for a little while. Xiaomo’s mother got mad at me and took Xiaomo with her, but at that time I didn’t even think

about chasing her down. But who knew that the mother would get into an accident and never contact me, even up until she died. She only asked someone to relay a message to me, saying that she left Xiaomo with a painter.” Han Guangming shook his head and let out a long sigh. “In the end, it really just happened because her mother was too stubborn...”

Shen Liufei didn’t leave time for him to dwell in the past and said, “Go on.”

Han Guangming said, “After that, my business got better. You know, the more successful you get, the lonelier you become, and I started to recall my family almost every night until I couldn’t withstand the pain. So I started looking for Xiaomo. It took me a whole decade, and I only managed to find some clues last year, but I wasn’t ready to confirm it. Fortunately, that *Ode to the Goddess of Luo* case got on national headlines, and after I saw Tang Zhaozhong’s information on the news, I finally confirmed her mother gave Xiaomo to that painter. I was planning on revealing myself to her after I got closer, but I didn’t realize her grandfather’s case shocked her so much that she decided to travel on her own. She’s a pretty young lady and isn’t even twenty yet, and with all the money she made from selling art, it was too dangerous for her to be roaming around all on her own. That’s why I followed her.”

Xie Lanshan was shocked. “You’ve followed her to all those countries she visited? How?”

Han Guangming suddenly lifted his eyebrows proudly and smiled. “I added her on WeChat as a client and followed her Weibo. I even got to know some of her friends—the point is, as long as I’m willing to shell out some money and time, I can find out where she’s going anytime. Don’t underestimate a dad’s investigative skills; we’re just as good as cops!”

Shen Liufei continued, “She did tell me that she felt someone was following her. Because she was already in Thailand when she said this, I mistakenly assumed the person was Anuchit—but it turned out to be you all along.”

“I’m just scared that she wouldn’t forgive me or accept me. If I knew this was going to happen one day, I would have told her the truth much earlier.” Han Guangming’s eyes dimmed like a cloud of pain coloring his face. “I later followed her to Thailand and saw Anuchit flirting with her near the bar, then within the blink of an eye, she was gone.”

“So you discovered Anuchit’s address, found out he kidnapped and sold your daughter, and thought to kill the man?” Xie Lanshan said, confused. “You have so much money, you could have easily bought her back instead of dirtying your hands.”

“I didn’t plan on killing him. I was on my knees at the time, crying and begging him to tell me where Xiaomo was. I brought a lot of money with me and told him I would pay however much he wanted, that I was willing to give everything I had to bring my daughter back, but he only told me nonchalantly that he already sold the girl to a club called Sin House. But he also said that wasn’t going to be the final place where she would serve customers. Even he didn’t know where she’d end up being

sold.” Han Guangming’s eyes grew dark and his round face turned menacing as he spoke. He clenched his fist and said, “He even said that if I have so much money, I might as well go find another woman and have her give birth to another child—because Xiaomo was likely already being violated and harassed by some disgusting pervert...”

Nobody could understand the anger the man had felt when he’d heard those words. At the time, he’d taken an object on the table and violently hit the trafficker’s head like an uncontrollable beast.

Likewise, when he picked up the photo from the dimly lit storage unit and saw that innocent smile of the girl he was willing to love for his whole life, he was reminded of the pain and suffering she might have been going through at that moment.

In the spur of the moment, regret and anger consumed him. He couldn’t forgive this sinful man who dared to harm his daughter and suffocated Gold Tooth until he was dead.

Outside the bureau, a colorful dusk painted the skies as the wind continued to blow on the bushes. A gentle breeze blew into the office. The window frame creaked as if it was sighing or humming.

After a long silence, Han Guangming downed the last bit of the beer and said, “All right, and that’s the end of the story.” He shrugged as if to laugh at himself and said, “I guess there really isn’t any climax to it, huh? Aren’t all those murder suspects in movies super smart? But not me, I’m just full of holes all over that can easily be seen through.”

After a brief pause, Shen Liufei asked, “You refused to accept the DNA test and even offered to confess your crimes instead. Do you not plan on letting her know that you’re her father?”

Han Guangming shook his head and laughed bitterly. “What’s the point of letting her know now? She’s had a tough life. All these years have been painful for her...”

He knew how hurtful the incident with the old painter had been to her and didn’t want the same tragedy to dawn upon the girl, by making her suffer another loss.

Xie Lanshan wasn’t sure if this was the right decision and took a step forward, asking, “Are you sure you don’t want to tell her? You killed the man for her, perhaps she wouldn’t blame you—”

Shen Liufei pressed on his shoulders and nodded toward Han Guangming. “We promise we won’t say a word.”

As if the last worry in his heart had finally been settled, Han Guangming let out another long sigh and gave Shen Liufei a grateful smile, “Thank you.”

After the questioning, Wen Jue and Tang Xiaomo ran out to the yard to escape the heat inside the bureau. They waited for Xie Lanshan to come out so that they could all return to the hotel together.

Tang Xiaomo seemed to be interested in everything in this foreign country as she dragged Wen Jue around like they were two little bees in a flower garden.

The girl looked like her mother, but her gleeful and cute round face took after her father. In the man's eyes, the girl was virtually flawless; she was like a beauty carved from a jade sculpture, just a little thinner. He recalled that she also loved going to new places when she was little. Sometimes she would cry after tripping from excitement, but unlike the little girl, he had to keep his own pain silent in his heart. He swore to himself that he would protect her for the rest of her life, allowing her to fall comfortably into his powerful and dependable arms.

Perhaps there was something in spirit that connected them. Tang Xiaomo suddenly stood up and lifted her head, then turned in Han Guangming's direction.

As their gazes met, Tang Xiaomo held up a hand and waved at him. She had a good impression of this pudgy manager, who answered all of her requests, in contrast to Wen Jue's occasional complaints and coldness.

This might be the last time he would see this girl look up at him with a smile in his lifetime. Han Guangming could feel his blood boil as he quickly lifted his arm to wave back. But before he could even move his arm, Tang Xiaomo's attention was distracted by another exotic plant in the yard. She turned her head and shoved her face into it, nagging Wen Jue to take a photo for her.

The man couldn't express his disappointment. His hand froze in midair, his fingers slowly curled down. Yet, after a brief moment, he once again opened his palms and pressed them gently on the glass window. As if touching his beloved daughter's face from light-years away, he quietly repeated to himself, "Hello, my dear."

Hello, my dear.

After all the questioning was over, Wen Jue and Tang Xiaomo were told that Han Guangming confessed to his crimes.

"Your manager doesn't seem like a bad guy at all..." The girl looked up at the boy beside her in shock—and only in shock.

"Maybe it was because of me. I told him before that greed would kill him one day..." Wen Jue also felt he was in a daze, assuming his manager had also made a mistake because greed blinded him. He didn't make any other remarks and looked at Han Guangming. Two Thai police took the man out, one on each side, from the interrogation room. They all walked slowly toward the two young people.

The man didn't look at the two as he passed by them, afraid that he would expose his emotions. He walked past her, the girl he loved with his life.

He couldn't bring himself to look at her right now. He remembered watching old videos of the little girl again and again since she first went missing. He watched the little girl, who was like a ball of white sticky rice, call him "Dad." He would often find himself stuck between two extreme emotions—feeling overjoyed at the video or ready to cry on his knees in regret.

In the end, he couldn't hold it in. His hands were cuffed, his head hung toward the ground as he walked. At first, it was just tears welling in his eyes, but as soon as he realized this would be the last time they would ever see one another, the tears finally

rolled down his cheeks.

The man wasn't very attractive, and with tears and snot flowing from his face, he felt even uglier. Tang Xiaomo clung to Wen Jue's arm and stared at the crying Han Guangming for a while until the police took him away. The short and round figure disappeared from her sight.

"Look at Boss Han, look..." Tang Xiaomo leaned in to speak quietly into Wen Jue's ear. "He's such an ugly crier..."

Revenge

The international operation ended on a joyous note with the true culprit arrested and hostages saved. The duties of the Blue Foxes in Thailand were finally completed. While the officers were preparing to return to their home country, Somsak paid them one last visit.

He told the two young officers that the Thai police had infiltrated the abandoned factory according to the location that Wen Jue and Shen Liufei gave, but discovered it was already empty. The traffickers had transferred all the slaves to a different location and they'd only captured a few insignificant people in Sin House. In short, Guan Nuoqin and his human traffickers were still nowhere to be found. All leads were cut off. Chief Kang Tai of the Bangkok police branch was also busy reporting the news of settling the big cases to his bosses and didn't seem to care much about following up on these human-trafficking cases. Of course, Somsak worried that someone in the bureau was already working with Guan Nuoqin. If the Blue Fox members were to leave right now, their case against Guan Nuoqin would likely grow cold like all the other missing-persons cases in Thailand.

For the sake of those children and young women that were captured, the old cop asked for their help.

Xie Lanshan was well acquainted with Somsak and knew how stubborn the old man could be, so he provoked the old cop, "Your leaders said this case is closed now. Why do you want to give yourself more work?"

"Saving lives even at the cost of our own is a universal moral duty that all cops around the world should share." The old cop was short, but his words towered grandly above him. With a confident and courageous look on his face, he said, "This isn't going to change because we're of different ethnicities."

If Shen Liufei wasn't beside him right now, Xie Lanshan would not have been able to stand under the same roof as Chi Jin. The two quickly exchanged a glance. Shen Liufei gave him a light nod. The stubborn old cop reminded Xie Lanshan of his father and captain; they all shared the desire to save all lives within their reach, even if it was just one person's.

Ling Yun, also in the room, understood what the old cop was asking. The young man's blood boiled with passion as soon as he heard the request, but they had come only at the special request of Director Peng and had no real jurisdiction to act on their own. While Ling Yun hesitated in silence, the temporary captain, Chi Jin, accepted the offer.

“Sure,” Chi Jin said with certainty. “We’ll stay.”

“W-wait...” Ling Yun was surprised that Chi Jin didn’t oppose Xie Lanshan directly this time but also recognized that this wasn’t any trivial matter. He attempted to persuade his leader, “Uh... should we at least send a report to Director Peng first? It might not be a good idea to just act on our own...”

Annoyed, Chi Jin interrupted him. “I’m the captain now. There’s no need for me to wait for approval to act in an emergency. Besides, even if we saved Wen Jue and Tang Xiaomo, this case isn’t completely settled yet. Officer Somsak is right, our duty is to protect innocent lives and we shouldn’t be afraid of making sacrifices. We shouldn’t make any exceptions just because we’re not from the same country.”

Ling Yun grew more puzzled. Considering Chi Jin’s strict and careful attitude, he would never have accepted Somsak’s request. Law enforcement in a foreign country was one of the biggest taboos in public security due to the differences in governing laws and customs. They were police officers of China and could not conduct investigations on their own on foreign land. Even in a collaborative effort, they still needed approval from their bosses on both sides in order to act.

Ever since coming to Thailand, Ling Yun had noticed the changes in Chi Jin. The young captain’s mood was a roller coaster that often swung between rage and idleness. Ling Yun originally thought it was just the effects of a different climate, but he recalled the time he accidentally went into Chi Jin’s room during their stay. He noticed the man frantically hiding a half-filled bottle in the room—the bottle looked familiar, and he was almost certain it was of meth.

Despite being the youngest member of the Blue Foxes, Ling Yun was still a drug enforcement officer and had sharp senses when it came to illegal substances. Even so, out of concern for his comrade and colleague, he couldn’t bring himself to accept his suspicion.

Using Wen Jue’s witness account about another Chinese boy being sold into slavery, the Blue Fox members stayed a little longer in Thailand after reporting back to their home base. They were asked to collaborate with the Thai police to eliminate the human-trafficking organizations and ensure the safety of their own citizens. While planning to take down Guan Nuoqin, they also had to be careful around the spy within the bureau, so the case was delayed longer than they expected.

Kang Xin didn’t participate too much in this case, but knew he wasn’t in a position to help out because of his complicated background. He already gave up hope on a-Liang providing a heart donation and no longer had the energy to focus on anything else with his daughter’s illness worsening by the day.

Yaya fell while going down the stairs one day and ended up in the emergency room. The hospital reported that she was once again in critical condition.

Her symptoms had improved with medication, but the hospital warned that her overall condition was still worsening and only a heart transplant could save her life.

Yet where would they find a donor? The wait seemed to be endless.

Shen Liufei took a break and went to visit the sick girl at Kang Xin's house. He had heard her late-stage illness had forced her to leave the hospital. In other words, during a time when their only hope was to wait for a donor, the hospital had nothing else they could do to treat her.

Xie Lanshan waited on the ground level. He was still a cop and wasn't in a position to speak with Kang Xin, so he could only let Shen Liufei handle the social activity.

The house was located in the corner of a rather quiet part of the city. Shen Liufei scanned the house as he stepped in; the small living space was clean and bright. It was difficult to imagine this was the residence of a single father and his daughter.

After rescuing Wen Jue, Shen Liufei had also passed by Kang Xin a few times in the bureau, but he kept his promise and didn't reveal how he had snuck into the criminal organization. Kang Xin was grateful to Shen Liufei for not exposing his secret during a turbulent time in the bureau.

"The place is small, but please make yourself at home." Kang Xin wasn't great at social calls. He scratched his face and head as he looked at his guest, acting slightly antsy, and said, "Yaya might still be awake right now. You can go visit her."

They carefully opened the door to the girl's bedroom and saw her already lying on her hard wooden bed. She wasn't asleep, just extremely weak. Most of her time was now spent in a comalike state, as she went to bed much earlier than most people.

"Yaya?" the man called his daughter.

The girl didn't respond.

"Yaya?" Afraid that his daughter was in a coma, Kang Xin called her again. He was on edge at every interaction with her now. Any response would shock him.

The girl frowned slightly and turned. She heard him, but it seemed she just didn't want to respond.

The girl was very mature and used to be close to her father. As if she was afraid she would fall asleep and never wake up again, she had clung to Kang Xin day and night. Instead of asking him to read fairy tales, she used to listen to him talk about stories of solving cases. Her eyes would grow wide as she stared in admiration.

But after that night, Yaya refused to talk to him. She was disappointed in this man, just as Kang Xin was disappointed in himself.

"She's asleep... let's talk outside." Kang Xin felt a bit awkward and led Shen Liufei out of the bedroom as he closed the door.

"How is Yaya's situation?" Shen Liufei asked, concerned.

"Same. The only cure is a heart transplant. Her heart is almost at its limit right now and there's nothing else we can do..." The wind outside banged on the windows as the man wept.

"That may not be true." After a moment of pondering, Shen Liufei said, "There is another method we can try, aside from waiting for a donor. I have a friend who's an expert brain surgeon in the US, who also has many connections to other neurosurgeons. If you can accept the concept of an artificial human heart transplant,

perhaps Yaya can be saved.”

Kang Xin had never heard of this. Shocked, he asked, “Artificial human heart transplant? What is that? Is it possible?”

Shen Liufei nodded and continued, “There was a young man in the US who once lived an extra five hundred days through an artificial heart while waiting for a donor. His life during that time was no different from any other person.”

This was a torch in the darkness. Kang Xin wanted to grab it, but he knew the situation right now wasn’t optimistic and said with concern, “But this surgery... it must cost a lot of money...”

Shen Liufei said, “A single artificial heart could cost around two hundred fifty thousand dollars.”

That didn’t include the cost of flying over to the US and hospitalization. Kang Xin calculated an estimate in his mind and realized how hefty it would be; perhaps the only solution was to sell the house. But if they sold that, they would have nowhere else to stay.

Shen Liufei seemed to know what the man was thinking and offered, “I can front the cost for you.”

Kang Xin was stunned. He immediately shook his head and said, “No, no, we’re not family or friends. There’s no reason for me to accept your sponsorship.”

“I’m not sponsoring you,” Shen Liufei said. He understood the pride of the man and didn’t push it further. Instead, he told the man calmly, “Just take it as a loan. You still have a while before you retire, so you can pay it back eventually.”

“But...” Kang Xin was still hesitating. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust this surgeon, he still felt guilt. “I’m still a cop. I may have done some bad things in the past, but... helping you sneak into the organization was part of my job. There’s no need for you to repay me for that.”

“No, you helped me a lot.” Shen Liufei faintly smiled but added sternly, “You helped me find a vital piece of memory I’d lost; you helped me realize how important a certain someone is in my life.”

Shen Liufei had wanted to sponsor the surgery in order to exchange information with Kang Xin regarding the drug lord, but as soon as he saw the sickly young girl, he suddenly felt it was inhumane to threaten a father like that. Relying on bargains and threats would only make him the same as those heartless criminals who worked for Guan Nuoqin.

That was why he decided not to speak a word of his plan.

“I’ll give you some time to think.” Right before stepping out of the door, Shen Liufei noticed some colorful clay animals placed on the cabinet in the living room. Judging from their shape, they seemed to have been crafted by Yaya. He took one from the cabinet and said to Kang Xin, “Your daughter has artistic talent. I’ll be waiting for her to become a professional in the future. Until then, I’ll take this as interest.”

Yaya loved drawing and crafting because of her inability to do extreme exercises. Kang Xin had been a cop for almost two decades and had seen many different faces through the countless cases he was involved in. Yet even among the thousands of people he'd met, he'd never met someone as simultaneously cold and caring as Shen Liufei. The two contradicting characteristics blended perfectly in this man; his empathy and kindness was visibly sincere to Kang Xin.

Before Shen Liufei could walk down the stairs, the man inside the house rushed out.

"I accept your sponsorship, but I can't accept it without anything in return." Kang Xin looked at Shen Liufei with his bright eyes and said, "I have a way to get close to Guan Nuoqin."

(ii)

Mouths had been tight lately. Despite successfully transferring the hostages and slaves to a new location, Guan Nuoqin wasn't sure how involved the Chinese and Thai cops were in the case. Kang Tai coincidentally contacted him at this time to meet up in person at one of Guan Nuoqin's personal hideouts.

Of course, a sly old man like Guan Nuoqin would have more than one hideout. He had his men scattered around the residence, each one sharp and dangerous; he even had stationed snipers on top of trees. The men were like an army, armed and tightly surrounding the mansion.

Kang Tai didn't bring many people with him. There were some cops in casual wear waiting on the outside; all of them carried guns on their waists. Kang Tai was a careful man who didn't feel safe talking to a fearsome drug lord like Guan Nuoqin if he didn't bring some of his men along, so he had specifically asked his close subordinates to bring a few reliable allies to follow him along to the drug lord's place before leaving the bureau.

It was nighttime at the mansion, and despite being the biggest drug lord of the Golden Triangle right now, Guan Nuoqin was still nowhere near as powerful as Mu Kun was at his prime. He also looked ordinary: his hair was white and skin was crusty and dry. He looked to be no different from any other old man who enjoyed a relaxing afternoon in nature.

Yet he had a pair of sharp hawklike eyes and a tall aquiline nose that exposed the brutality and evil inside him. It was almost fleeting, making it difficult for anyone to judge his true nature.

The drug lord was now gleefully planting flowers in his garden in a cheap Hawaiian shirt, his hands dirty from the mud in the yard. He lifted his head as he heard someone open the door and greeted Kang Tai courteously, asking, "Want to see the flowers I'm planting?"

Kang Tai dressed well even outside of the bureau, donning a suit. He seemed quite displeased at how dirty the plants and garden were and waved his hand in disgust, then waited patiently inside the living room.

Guan Nuoqin knew that Kang Tai had a younger brother named Kang Xin who also helped with his business a few times because of his daughter's situation, but he never confused the two. Kang Xin had an unremovable air of roughness in him while Kang Tai was slim, pale, and much better dressed. The latter had the eyes of a soldier with a hint of slyness, like a fox.

The old man was finally done fiddling with his plants and left his garden. As he wiped his hands, he said, "It's not a big deal. Why do you even need to pay me a visit?"

"Not a big deal? Those Blue Foxes are about to destroy your nest, and you think this isn't a big deal?" Kang Tai's words were harsh and condescending as he said, "The Pulitzer Prize report two years ago was on the illegal labor and sweatshop culture in Southeast Asia—the slaves and fishermen are already a problem known around the world. But you're telling me you still dare to capture people near the China-Myanmar border at a time like this? Great, it's easy to lure the hunters in, but now they won't leave. Those Blue Foxes aren't going to leave this country until they completely destroy you."

His blood was boiling with rage as he scolded the older man, "You call yourself a drug lord yet you continue to involve yourself in these kidnappings and this human-trafficking business."

This didn't provoke Guan Nuoqin, who only let out a sigh. "Almost six hundred thousand acres of opium plants near the Golden Triangle have now been taken over by tea, corn, and other crops. Traditional drugs like heroin are also going down in demand in the market; I've thought about upgrading the narcotics but it's not that easy..."

Puzzled, Kang Tai asked, "Isn't it just ice? What's so hard about upgrading?"

Guan Nuoqin shook his head and said, "Of course it's not hard for small businesses to fight in a market, but the new drug market in Southeast Asia is already well established. If I want to get into this market and control it, I'll need to consider many aspects, like how to obtain recipes, develop new drugs efficiently, and maximize output. The most important aspect of all of this is also the purity of the ice."

Kang Tai understood the logic behind this; the higher the purity of the meth, the more profitable it was. If Guan Nuoqin wanted to solidify his position as the drug lord in the Golden Triangle, he had to be able to create a high-purity ice that could completely control the local market.

Guan Nuoqin didn't like the heat today. Because of his joint problems, he couldn't sit in a room with AC, so he ordered his servants to fan him. He continued, "Anuchit wasn't just a normal chemistry teacher. I had plans to promote him to lead the development of red ice. I didn't think..."

Kang Tai's eyes widened slightly at this new term and he asked, "Red ice?"

"Pure crystal meth extract, the purity can go as high as 99.9 percent. There is already some floating around the market right now, but it's still very scarce." Recalling how his most promising source of income was now gone, Guan Nuoqin shook his head in disappointment. "How could I have known he'd be killed by that Chinese fatty?"

After a moment of regret, the old drug lord suddenly realized he had once mentioned red ice to Kang Tai, and the latter had expressed great interest.

The sudden but fleeting reaction was clearly abnormal.

Guan Nuoqin spent many years swimming in the dangerous Golden Triangle and had a sharp mind. A simple hint was enough for him to realize that the man standing before him wasn't Kang Tai but Kang Xin. It was almost shocking for him to slim down at least ten kilograms within such a short period of time and act as his brother so perfectly.

During the conversation, everyone else aside from the servant fanning the boss had left the room. Guan Nuoqin decided to not play with fire and continued to converse with "Kang Tai" about his business while he slowly walked around the room. The mansion was equipped with all sorts of traps; he knew exactly which vase or antique had guns hidden in them.

Guan Nuoqin wasn't sure what the man wanted and intended to capture him alive. This wasn't the real Kang Tai, but the cops that came with him were real officers. Even those cops were being played, so he couldn't just kill these people without reason.

"Kang Tai, we've been working together for all these years. I've always wanted to ask you something—you're always so well-dressed no matter where you go. Is it not hot?" Guan Nuoqin had his back against "Kang Tai" right now with a gun in hand, confident he could take the man down. The two men were left alone inside the house. Guests were always searched before entering, so he knew Kang Xin couldn't possibly have a gun in hand right now.

"I still think it's hot," the old drug lord said with a smile before the cop could respond. He slowly turned around and said, "How about you take off that jacket and roll up your sleeves. We'll talk when it's a little cooler, hm?"

He didn't let the cop find excuses and had already pointed his gun. The drug lord knew that Kang Tai had a burn scar on his arm, but Kan Xin didn't. This was a fact everyone in the bureau knew.

"What's this? Are you suspecting me?" Kang Xin didn't panic and opened his arms, allowing Guan Nuoqin's servant to take off his suit jacket. He then quickly rolled up his sleeves to expose a gruesome burn scar.

"I... I'm not suspecting you..." Surprised that he was just being paranoid, Guan Nuoqin gave the man a relieved smile. His suspicion dwindled as he put his gun away.

To his surprise, the cop in front of him acted swiftly and jumped the moment the gun was down. Soon after, the sound of a gunshot reverberated.

The people outside rushed into the mansion, unsure where to point their weapons.

Kang Xin had already taken a bullet and was struggling to stand. Blood gushed from the injury on his chest. He waved his burnt arm and pointed the other hand at Guan Nuoqin, who was still holding a gun. Kang Xin called out to his subordinates, “He betrayed me! He’s going to kill all of you too—”

Within the blink of an eye, Guan Nuoqin could only fire a few rounds at this man before he could say any more words. He didn’t have time to think, explain, or even evaluate the situation, and shot the man down to the ground.

Seeing their chief shot down right in front of their eyes, the cops who followed him pulled out their guns without hesitation, marking the start of a large and chaotic war.

(iii)

Guan Nuoqin died under a rain of bullets, and this gunfight also exposed all the internal problems within the police department. Branch Chief Kang Tai was hanging onto his last breath by the time he was discovered. His brother Kang Xin had tied him up, stripped him of his clothes, and locked him in the basement of his own home. In front of him was evidence to prove his association with organized crime, and facing him was a full investigation and legal consequences for his actions.

Kang Xin burned himself to fake the injury his brother had. He had already determined that creating an illusion made of truths and falsehoods was the only way to fight against the calculating and sly drug lord.

With the death of Guan Nuoqin and the fall of Kang Tai, the subordinates that worked beneath them lost all reason to fight against the police. The Chinese Blue Fox team also helped the Thai police rescue over eight hundred slaves and hostages who had been kidnapped or sold off to criminals, and suffered under the organization.

This good news shook the entire world, but even better tidings arrived: Yaya finally had a heart donor. A woman who died in a car accident had donated her heart. She had a smaller heart than most average people and it fit perfectly into Yaya’s little chest.

The little girl also knew about the death of her father. Crowds of police officers, journalists, and locals paid her visits. Everyone cried by her bedside in a range of loud cries to silent weeping. Only she didn’t cry. Her small face was blank and silent, as if her soul had left her body.

Yaya saw Shen Liufei when she arrived at the surgery room. She had a good impression of this man. Shen Liufei walked toward her and she reached out a hand to hold his. She lifted her head and asked quietly, “Is my dad a bad guy?”

Shen Liufei got onto his knees by the girl’s bedside and held her small hand gently and warmly. He shook his head and said in confidence, “Your father is a hero.”

It stunned the girl for a few seconds, then she smiled slightly. This seemed to trigger some sort of emotion in her; the laugh quickly became a cry and tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I knew he was a hero. I told lots of people about it—that my dad is a hero..." She was too prideful and regretful. This young girl wasn't able to face the cruelty of separation in the adult world, so she could only grab tightly onto Shen Liufei's hand. She looked at the only man she could trust for help and said, "But there's nothing special about a hero. My dad's gone, my daddy's gone..."

"He's here," Shen Liufei said lightly. "Of course he's still here."

"But... where is he? Where?" The little girl looked up at the man kneeling beside her bed as she cried.

"He's deep in the sun, the end of the stars. He will always protect and watch over you." Shen Liufei lifted his head and guided the little girl to look in the same direction. His gaze fell outside the window toward the reddish and golden leaves of the trees until it flew out to a freer and higher sky above them. His voice was cold and deep, almost emotionless, but there was undeniable sincerity and softness in those words that had a persuasive power.

Finally, he gave the little girl a faint smile and said, "Like now, he's watching to see if his little girl can stay brave. He wants to see if she can have this surgery that will give her a new life without tears."

With the encouragement of this pretty adult before her, Yaya held back her tears. She didn't want her dad to leave with concern and still worry about her in the afterlife.

After he saw the girl off into the surgery room, Xie Lanshan walked up from behind. He noticed Shen Liufei's grave expression and wrapped an arm around the artist's waist, asking, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Shen Liufei turned back to glance at Xie Lanshan. The light on his lover's face softened his expression as he nodded. "I just saw that Kang Xin left me a message in the end. He said that he had to do this because his crimes can only be atoned for by blood, so he can't disappoint his daughter. Their country has a reward for sacrifices made while on duty. He wanted to use the money to pay for Yaya's surgery so that he wouldn't need to owe anyone for his daughter's transplant."

"So Kang Xin planned on giving his life since the start of this operation." Xie Lanshan felt admiration toward this quiet and almost insignificant Thai police officer and said, "He reminded me of my own father. They're very similar in certain ways... both of them were quiet but strong. They were people who would give their lives to fulfill their duties and set an example for their children. Most importantly, they left without regret when they met their inevitable ends."

It was quite strange indeed. Ever since arriving in Thailand, the two fathers he had come into contact with differed vastly from old Xie, but they both reminded Xie Lanshan of his own father. Kang Xin was confident but lacked sophistication, while

Han Guangming shared almost no traits with old Xie. Xie Lanshan looked out the window; his vision blurred and eyes reddened.

He recalled the time when old Xie's body was returned to China, how his mother broke down in tears, but he didn't cry.

For a long time after old Xie passed, the boy grew more quiet and reserved. Aside from when he was going to and from school, he would not speak a word to anyone. He would spend the daytime staring at the crabapple flower outside his front door as it bloomed, then withered. At night, he would look at the moon in the sky and observe as it waned from a full moon to new moon.

Everyone around him told him to cry it out. Liu Yanbo and Tao Jun, the two family friends that were closest to him, would often visit him during that time and look at him with sympathy. They would persuade him to cry, saying that would make him feel better and finally settle everything.

"He's not even here anymore, what's the point of crying?" That was what Xie Lanshan told them back then and what he told Shen Liufei right now. "I promised myself back then that I will honor him with the rest of my life's glory. As for tears, they can just blend in with the rice and tea we consume—they're gone once they get digested."

"We're about to return. Are you sure you've thought everything through?" Shen Liufei reached a hand over to Xie Lanshan's shoulders and turned the man to face him. He cupped Xie Lanshan's face in his hands and caressed his cheeks. His fingers then brushed past the frame of Xie Lanshan's eyes and eyebrows as if to wipe away the invisible tears of sorrow. The artist frowned slightly and reminded the cop, "Even if Han Guangming admitted to his crimes, you still interrogated Gold Tooth. Considering your situation right now, it's very likely that you will face severe consequences when we return—"

"Shh." Before Shen Liufei could finish, Xie Lanshan winked playfully and interrupted him with a hush. Then, he grabbed Shen Liufei's hand that held the bullet and nudged his face against the palm. He closed his eyes as he felt his lover's cold but soft skin and murmured, "I not only have to carry out his unfinished duty, I also need to bring him justice."

The last few days had been busy in the bureau as the police worked to clean up the last of Guan Nuoqin's criminal organization and free the slaves. Now that he had some time for himself, Xie Lanshan used his last day in Thailand to do some personal investigating to find answers to a long-time question.

He paid Han Guangming a visit in jail and asked if the manager often bought off Hanhai City Branch Vice Chief Liu Yanbo.

Contrary to Xie Lanshan's expectation, Han Guangming shook his head and denied it, saying, "I've only met Chief Liu through a friend during a social mixer and had a couple of meals with him. But from what I understand, he's not that kind of person."

“What?” Xie Lanshan refused to believe a word and said coldly, “You said he isn’t that kind of person, but that plum painting you gifted him is still hanging in his living room.”

“Oh, c’mon, it’s not even the real deal. He just likes little fancy things like that, but if I were to actually bring in something worth the original price, he’d insist on paying me back.” Han Guangming shook his head and continued, trusting Liu Yanbo’s character, “I founded my own company and began doing this sort of cultural business back home. Befriending a cop wasn’t just for face; I was also looking for some conveniences in business. Some celebrities under me have broken laws before, so I’ve asked him to help me out a bit in the past. I tried offering at least seven to eight digits to have him cover up for me back then! Even if you were a drug dealer you’d have to be in business for a while to earn this kind of money, but the man got extremely mad at me and rejected my offer. He even almost threatened to cut ties with me! It was only thanks to a mutual friend helping mediate that we still maintained our relationship.”

Xie Lanshan still refused to believe the words and squinted in suspicion. He didn’t speak and waited for the man to continue.

“I’m sure you’ve seen that news about that one kid who’s around Wen Jue’s age being caught doing drugs. That’s because Chief Liu refused to work with me and insisted on arresting him. He had many friends asking him to handle these sorts of things, but he’s never once agreed.” Han Guangming finished everything off with confidence and said sincerely, “Chief Liu is not that kind of person. I know he’s got some flaws, quite a lot of them actually, but he’s not someone who would make serious mistakes overall.”

Xie Lanshan’s expression was still stern as he stared at the manager with sharp eyes. “You’re not lying to me, are you?”

“Why would I lie to you?” Han Guangming shook the handcuffs around his wrists and said, “I’m already stuck like this. What good would lying to you do?”

Han Guangming’s words disappointed Xie Lanshan. No matter how much he tried to study the nuanced changes on the man’s face to rip through a lie, he found his efforts to be in vain. Han Guangming was very forthcoming about everything—therefore, if Liu Yanbo wasn’t a master of disguise, then the man must not be who he thought he was.

And even if the man was not a traitor... Xie Lanshan had always assumed that Chief Liu was the Apostle who’d betrayed the police and killed his father. On one hand, Liu Yanbo was always at odds with him and refused to promote or give him any bonuses despite his efforts. On the other, he knew that Liu Yanbo was engaged in shady business behind the bureau. Now, it seemed as if the chief was simply following Sui Hong’s orders to watch over Xie Lanshan, and the man really had done nothing wrong.

If Liu Yanbo wasn't the Apostle, then the last one remaining in the Flaming Triangle was...

This horrifying thought sent a pang through his chest. He didn't want to think about it, but he couldn't stop himself.

Xie Lanshan suddenly recalled a detail that everyone had missed just before he left. He stopped by the door and turned around to ask the criminal, "Do you remember what Anuchit's actual dying message was the day he was killed? The one on the clock and abacus."

Han Guangming attempted to trace back his memories and said, "I don't remember what the time was on the clock, but the beads... I think it was... 42... 4219886..."

"4... 2... 42..." Xie Lanshan mumbled those numbers as he quickly searched on the periodic table of elements in his head, attempting to piece together a message or phrase. "42 is Mo... 19 is K..."

His face grew pale as his body shivered, then he called out in shock, "Shit!"

His worst nightmare.

Mokorn, the other alias for Mu Kun.

The expert chemist and caged bird Anuchit grew suspicious of the man he was working for. Afraid that he would be killed for no reason, he purposely left a message that identified the man who threatened his life. Yet, almost as if the heavens were pranking everyone, a father who came to search for his daughter disrupted the case and removed the last dying message left by the man. Then, the drug lord borrowed Xie Lanshan's hand to get rid of Gold Tooth as revenge for betraying his old boss. Mu Kun had the purest red ice on the market. There was no way he couldn't buy off Guan Nuoqin's subordinates if he wanted to with the profits he could offer.

Even with all this careful planning, the key to success was the involvement of the police forces in both China and Thailand. If the Blue Foxes never joined in, Guan Nuoqin would never have fallen so easily with all the connections the man had with the Thai police. Mu Kun would have never been able to wait in the shadows for his enemy to fall and quickly regain control of this ever-changing climate within the Golden Triangle.

He had finally returned to his spot, once again claiming the throne of the Golden Triangle. Mu Kun stood on the high ground with his arms out. He lifted his head in silence, embracing his rebirth in a symbolic position.

The man was very handsome, so much so that even the scar on his face only added a unique flavor to his looks rather than making him ugly. His fake eye was still red, as if to purposely leave a symbol of his burning mad love and rage on his body.

Tang Qinglan said to him, "Little Captain Chi is proving to be quite useful, but he seems to think he's just undercover..."

Mu Kun didn't respond to the woman. The swift winds around him sounded like a hymn of the heavens. He waved his hands out as if he was a conductor of the night, joyfully leading this orchestra of nature.

“I’ve also heard that Xie Lanshan isn’t Xie Lanshan anymore—”

“Shut up! You really believe in that nonsense?” Mu Kun stopped, his good mood ruined at that instant. He turned and interrupted Tang Qinglan venomously. He didn’t believe in those rumors. He didn’t dare to. “Only I can kill him; he promised me he will live until the day I return to him.”

The Golden Triangle was a place of mystery in the dark. His gaze once again turned toward the direction of China in the distance.

“Has the wait been long?” He stared at the man he could only see in the void. Mu Kun’s mouth lifted into a wide but affectionate smile as he said, “I’m coming for you for real this time, Xie Lanshan.”

The Opacity of Good and Evil

After the disassembly of Guan Nuoqin's massive stowaway organization, the Thai police discovered a mass grave while rescuing the hostages and slaves near the border between Thailand and Myanmar.

The area was rural, near the point of interaction between the forest and river, between a village and farmland. It was like a rare otherworldly emerald—tranquil and peaceful—and normally undisturbed by the outside world. Yet after days and nights of digging, the police unearthed skeleton after skeleton, exposing the ugly truth.

The initial autopsy identified that most of these corpses were female. At least hundreds of them were found in this area. From the ID cards and other items left inside to identify the corpses, there were countless Chinese women that were buried there as well.

The police determined that these young women were likely kidnapped and sold into prostitution, then killed if they were caught attempting to escape or found ill during transport. The evil practice continued until it left these disposed bodies to become bones in the ground.

The Blue Fox members had just left Thailand on the last flight. Somsak didn't dare to delay this discovery and immediately contacted Xie Lanshan and Shen Liufei.

This was supposed to be the last night in Thailand for them. The two were enjoying their rare time of peace together after the case was settled, only to be disturbed by a phone call from Somsak.

The two men fell silent as soon as the line hung up.

Shen Liufei was silent because he immediately thought of his mother, followed by his suspicion that perhaps she was also buried among these hundreds of female corpses. He had been very interested in female kidnapping cases over the years. His laptop contained countless solved and cold cases; Zhuo Tian's case was merely one of many.

Out of a strange and inexplicable intuition from his familial bond, he always stubbornly believed that his mother had actually survived the massacre and was still living somewhere in this world. Perhaps she had truly died somewhere without anyone knowing.

Xie Lanshan's silence was also a reflexive reaction. He could understand what Shen Liufei was thinking, but because he was still using Ye Shen's body, he couldn't speak up. Rather, it was an almost cruel and awkward position for him.

Xie Lanshan finally broke this long silence and asked, “You plan on staying to investigate, right?”

Shen Liufei was used to hiding all his emotions behind his stony face, but now he found it difficult to cover himself up in front of his lover. His expression remained empty, but the worry deep in his eyes was clear. He nodded slightly and said, “But you need to go back.”

Xie Lanshan had to return. He knew that his interrogation this time would need to be addressed properly back home. The municipal bureau was calling him, the provincial branch was also summoning him. Phone calls and messages came in one after another like spells sent from abroad to drag him back home. History books said Yue Fei died in a temple of thorns, and had become a corpse shoved into the corner of a wall. He didn’t think he would face the same tragic death as the famed military general, but these endless phone calls certainly weren’t a good omen.

And no matter what, he was still a cop; a cop must follow orders given to him and fulfill his duty. In addition, that bit of suspicion stuck inside him was ready to explode. He needed to ask Tao Jun what the truth was.

The separation came as soon as they were reunited. Xie Lanshan was a bit upset. He lowered his head and pressed his forehead against Shen Liufei’s, then laughed nonchalantly. “It’s almost like we’re always saying goodbye to each other.”

“People constantly say that cops are always spending more time outside instead of with family. This may be the case from an outsider’s point of view, but we share the same burden on our shoulders,” Shen Liufei said as he lifted his head a little, pressing the tips of their noses together. He closed his eyes slightly and drowned himself in this moment of intimacy, then whispered, “Every temporary separation we face to discover the truth is proof of our bond—’til death do us apart.”

“You’re right, we do share the same burden.” Xie Lanshan chuckled at these words; they were sincere and kind but also filled with enough affection to brush the mist in Xie Lanshan’s heart away. He said, “But you’re not a cop, at most you’re just a cop’s wife.”

As soon as this thought arose, Xie Lanshan pressed forward and closed their distance with a kiss.

Shen Liufei answered those desires. Almost as soon as their lips touched, he stuck his tongue into Xie Lanshan’s mouth, invading him like a predator consuming his prey. The two deepened the kiss until it was engraved into the other’s soul.

Shen Liufei didn’t want to part from Xie Lanshan at a time like this; aside from his own desires, he worried that Xie Lanshan would have a difficult time facing the complex situation back home. With that worry in mind, Shen Liufei pressed Xie Lanshan down onto the hotel bed and began unzipping the man’s pants, promising, “Give me ten days, ten days at most. I will come back for you before the end of the month...”

Somsak thought that all members of the Blue Fox had already left, but Chi Jin and Ling Yun didn't actually go to the airport. Including temporary captain Chi Jin, the Blue Fox sent in a total of four members for this operation. The other two had a different departure time and left for the airport first.

Already delayed on the way to the airport, Chi Jin received a phone call that shook him up. He lowered his voice and said something in secret to the person on the other side of the line, then quickly hung up.

Halfway to the airport, Chi Jin suddenly asked to get out of the car. He told Ling Yun to go back first because he had some personal business to take care of.

Of course, Ling Yun wouldn't believe any of this. He complained in his head, *You and I got on the same plane to Thailand for work, even took up a subquest while we were at it, and now you're trying to say you have personal business?* The suspicion in his mind grew as odd signs piled up around him. The young officer was now determined to get down to the bottom of this abnormality. After the car had driven far enough and out of Chi Jin's sight, Ling Yun asked the driver to turn around and quietly follow the cab that Chi Jin just called.

They were already in a rush to the airport before this episode, so now they would certainly miss their flight. Their comrades back home had been sending them messages these past few days, complaining they needed to return so they could celebrate the closed case, but they all knew it was just another excuse to party for the young people. Turning halfway, Ling Yun took out the phone from his pocket and saw another message asking him to come back home soon. The young man who sent this message was Tu Lang, a renowned sharpshooter on the team. He was quite a handsome lad—tall with slightly tanned skin. However, due to spending all day at the shooting range for training and hugging the scope to his eyes when practicing ranged targets, his face had slowly formed around the shape of the gun these last few years.

Tu Lang was even more at odds with Chi Jin normally, so he wouldn't personally send a message to their temporary captain and instead bombarded Ling Yun's inbox with messages—mostly about games. The last message Ling Yun received said: *What time you arriving tonight? Man, my luck's been shit lately, waiting for you to get back so we can get our revenge!*

Ling Yun clenched his phone tightly. After some hesitation, he responded: *There might be a traitor on our team. I'm checking up on him right now. Don't ask questions or make a scene, wait for my message.*

Tu Lang might be a young man who liked to party, but he quickly realized the importance of this response and quieted down with the messages.

The driver was quite impressive, maintaining the perfect distance from the car they were tailing without alerting Chi Jin. Though maybe Chi Jin's mind wasn't on the job—he'd often drifted off at work lately.

The sky grew dark while the vehicles continued to drive through unfamiliar and rounding roads. They passed through the busy city streets until they headed toward a

deserted and rural area. The driver spoke Chinese, quite well even, but didn't know the tall and handsome young man he was driving was a special forces officer. He kindly warned the young man that the area they were heading toward was quite dangerous, and that tourists like him should be careful.

"Don't worry, thanks for your concern," Ling Yun thanked the driver and looked out the window. His gaze fell to the distance.

They were going farther and farther away from the city. The tall mountains were visible above them, shimmering golden under the foggy weather of dusk. The shape of the mountain was almost cute. Because it was a tea leaf farm, the plants were divided up cleanly like quilts from afar.

But Ling Yun's heart was racing, his frowning eyebrows still pressed tightly together.

The car drove for another ten minutes and night finally fell. The sky was dark. Ling Yun saw Chi Jin's car stop. The man got out of the car and walked alone toward a solitary house at the end of the mountain road.

(ii)

Night fell like a giant anvil weighing on one's shoulder, but also provided the best disguise for a lurker. Ling Yun was slightly shorter and thinner than Chi Jin, but he was much more dexterous. He carefully hid himself outside the house, unsure if he would be found out.

It was a cleanly decorated house with minimal furnishings that looked nothing like a place a female drug dealer would live. There was a man and woman inside; the man stood while the woman sat. Above them was a warm light that cast an elegant glow on their faces.

Using the dim light inside, Ling Yun clearly saw two e-cigarettes and a bag of red ice on the coffee table and felt his heart constrict.

"You helped me a lot. I'm the only one in charge of the red-ice business here now that Guan Nuoqin is dead," Tang Qinglan said with a pretty smile, her voice the sound of a siren. She took an e-cigarette and placed it in her mouth. She took in a breath, then leaned in toward Chi Jin and blew a cloud of white smoke through her red lips.

"Then why did you threaten me over the phone if I helped you? Do we not even have that bit of trust between us now?" Guan Nuoqin was an evil drug dealer and human trafficker, so staying behind to clean up the nest of demons with the Thai police was natural as part of his duty. His thoughts were justified, but the smoky red ice on his face made Chi Jin uncomfortable. He loosened his collar a little and held in the urge to look at the other cigarette on the table.

Tang Qinglan seemed to notice the man's discomfort and continued to blow out smoke, pushing the young man another step down toward the abyss.

Ling Yun recognized this woman—she seemed to be a famous business owner in Hanhai City. There were rumors about her being involved in black market antique sales, but no evidence had been found. Though now it seemed like she was involved in an even more dangerous trade than antiques.

“Give me this bag of red ice. I’m leaving if you have nothing else to say. I’ll notify you ahead of time if there’re any moves within the team.” Chi Jin wanted to act like an addicted officer who had no choice but to bow down to the drug dealers. He was convinced he’d already gained the woman’s trust.

“Why not have a taste now?” Tang Qinglan handed him the other e-cigarette on the table and once again blew out a cloud of smoke. She then gave the young captain a small smile and said, “There’s a bit of number 4 and ya ba mixed in this. It’s a really unique blend that will give you an unforgettable experience.”

Meth was nothing like heroin and had almost immediate addictive qualities. Meth users were often irritable and easily angered, and something as pure as 99.9% red ice was even more dangerous. Just like how, a few months ago, a high school girl who was taking “beauty pills” had bitten off a classmate’s ear, Chi Jin was already doing his utmost simply to maintain his cool. Ever since being interrupted by Ling Yun by accident last time, he started forcing himself to keep his mind off the drug. Yet at a time and place like this, he was nearly on the verge of a breakdown already.

The vein on his forehead popped, cold sweat rolled down his face. His body twitched, and that handsome face scrunched up in anger. This was a biological reaction. Ling Yun could tell with one glance.

“You can leave now or take a sip.” Tang Qinglan didn’t force the man to take drugs. She smiled at him, but beneath those pretty eyes was all the evilness in the world.

Recalling the mood swings and attitude changes he’d noticed over the past few days and the meth bottle that was hidden in the hotel room, Ling Yun’s heart sank. He still forced himself to observe his colleague’s actions. He tried to convince himself that this was just a special undercover mission Chi Jin was on.

But the man’s reaction was disappointing. Chi Jin walked up to the woman on his own, took the e-cigarette from her with a shaking hand, and was about to place it into his mouth.

Overdosing could occur when a mixture of drugs was taken without prescription. For anyone inexperienced with drug intake, this could be the equivalent of digging one’s own grave. After witnessing the last veil of shame stripped down, Ling Yun’s heart pained as he watched in shock. Seeing Chi Jin was about to sacrifice his own well-being to take the drug, he barged inside the house without hesitation, gun in hand.

“Put that thing down!” Ling Yun’s eyes and gunpoint were fixed on Tang Qinglan, but the words were for Chi Jin.

“Ling Yun, don’t worry about me...” Chi Jin didn’t realize Ling Yun had trailed him and went into a panic as soon as the young man barged in. The pain caused by drug addiction grew stronger by the second. It felt as if hundreds of thousands of worms were crawling beneath his skin and gnawing into his bones. Chi Jin held back the urge to explode in rage and ordered his teammate with the authority of a captain, “Get out!”

“This isn’t an undercover mission. You’re willingly falling down the abyss!” Ling Yun’s heart shattered as he heard the man shout and still cling tightly to the e-cigarette. “If the captain were to see you like this—”

“Don’t...” That one word completely broke Chi Jin. He no longer cared if he still needed to keep up the act to investigate and begged in despair, “D-don’t tell Captain...”

“I’m going to tell him, I’ll do that as soon as I get back.” The drug dealer before him was only a woman and he still had a gun in hand. Ling Yun was confident that he could escape safely with Chi Jin, so his attention was only focused on her in case she was ready to fight back.

Rage overtook his mind in that instant. Chi Jin pulled out his gun and hit the young man on the head from behind.

Members of the Blue Fox would never suspect their teammates; countless times working in dangerous situations had made them grow used to leaving their backs exposed to each other. Ling Yun didn’t think Chi Jin would actually attack him and fell to the ground with shock written on his face. The sharp pain in his head left him unable to stand for a moment.

The moment Ling Yun fell to the ground, Tang Qinglan quickly pulled out a gun hidden beneath the coffee table and pointed it directly toward Chi Jin.

“Toss the gun over.”

Chi Jin was also shocked at his own actions. Now that he was nothing but helpless prey in the hands of his enemy, he could only do as the other ordered.

A door that had been hidden in the shadows slowly opened up. Both Chi Jin and Ling Yun did not know there would be another person inside this house. His sudden appearance was like a bloodthirsty beast hidden in the dark and finally ready to step out and expose its fangs to its prey.

They both recognized the man.

It was Mu Kun, who had disappeared near Mekong River three years ago.

Ling Yun wanted to crawl up and take the gun he’d dropped, but Mu Kun was a step ahead and kicked the gun toward Tang Qinglan. The woman picked the gun up swiftly and confiscated the guns of both Blue Fox members.

Mu Kun walked toward Ling Yun with a gun and shot multiple rounds at Ling Yun’s limbs without hesitation. The young cop didn’t even have time to cry out when four bullets pierced right through his flesh and bones. Aside from Xie Lanshan, the drug lord despised all members of the Blue Fox and found pleasure in torturing them

like a cat playing with a dying rat.

Chi Jin didn't know the situation would become like this and growled in anger, but Tang Qinglan reacted swiftly and fired a round near the young man, reminding Chi Jin to stay put.

"Don't move." Tang Qinglan turned her gun back at Chi Jin.

Up until the point Mu Kun appeared, Chi Jin still believed he was in an act to hide his identity as an undercover officer, that all of his actions were sacrifices that were made to earn the trust of his enemies. Yet now, he wasn't sure who was the hunter and who was the prey.

"Do you still not understand?" The woman didn't want to kill two members of the Blue Fox at a time like this, knowing that she could still use this young man in front of her. She eyed the direction of a cabinet and hinted that this room had more traps than Chi Jin thought, and then said, "Your comrade died because of you. You can never return to the Blue Foxes."

Mu Kun wasn't in a rush to take revenge from the events of three years ago and didn't plan on killing this Blue Fox boy. He squatted down by Ling Yun and searched his pockets, checking to see if there was anything he could use.

Soon, he found a cell phone.

The phone was fingerprint locked. Mu Kun attempted to use Ling Yun's hand to unlock the device, but Ling Yun knew the drug lord's plan. Afraid that the information on his phone would put his comrades' lives in danger, he clenched his fists tightly.

Of course, this kind of rebellious act was useless and almost laughable.

"You Blue Fox members sure are quite stubborn." Mu Kun laughed. He pulled out a knife with intricate carvings from his waist, forced open Ling Yun's index finger, and cut it off in one swift motion.

He unlocked the device with the bloody finger.

He soon noticed the conversation between Ling Yun and Tu Lang; the last message worked just perfectly for him. An eerie smile bloomed on his face; the man responded in fluent Chinese with five simple words:

Xie Lanshan is the traitor.

Before a response could be received, Mu Kun turned off the bloody phone and tossed it aside.

The violent and loud sound of the phone crashing into the wall roared like the raging thunder of revenge.

Finally, everything was heading in the direction he had planned.

(iii)

Despite preparing himself for the worst, Xie Lanshan could never have imagined how dramatically the world had turned around as soon as he returned from Thailand.

Starting with one message from Kang Tai that angered Director Peng, in addition to Liu Mingfang's purposeful spread of the news, the entire municipal bureau was made aware of the horrifying brain surgery.

After a report from sharpshooter Tu Lang, Ling Yun completely lost contact as soon as he sent out the important message about the traitor.

They questioned Xie Lanshan for three whole nights without rest. They told him it wasn't an official questioning and simply an internal chat, but the intensity was already on a par with going into court. All leaders in the bureau, including Liu Yanbo, joined in the questioning.

They shone bright light into his eyes and questioned him like a criminal suspect, asking the same two questions over and over: *Why did he torture Gold Tooth so violently? And where did Ling Yun go?*

Xie Lanshan wanted to laugh; he started off by answering them truthfully until he finally decided to just keep silent.

These bosses and leaders had mindfully avoided mentioning the surgery because the provincial department had made no official statements, and no one had experience dealing with such a ridiculous case. The ship of Theseus was an eternal philosophical question; who was this Xie Lanshan sitting before them right now? No one could give a confident answer.

Because the higher-ups were tired of the endless questioning as well, another round that lasted until midnight finally ended. Xie Lanshan walked out of the municipal bureau's questioning room.

There was still light in the violent crimes unit office. Xie Lanshan walked toward it like a firefly chasing after that sole dim light in the dark.

Ding Li was brewing coffee and playing with her phone in front of the coffee maker. Most female workers didn't normally need to stay the night for overtime, but she was watching a drama in the coffee room without paying much attention to time. She knew her bosses had been coming over lately to question Xie Lanshan and left late. Afraid they would catch her and ask why she was staying in the bureau so late into the night, she had to do everything discreetly with the lights off.

Ding Li kept the cell phone on her arm while ripping open a pack of instant coffee for herself, humming the theme song of a popular movie.

Her body moved to the beat as she sang. Ding Li didn't have musical senses but was strong in language. She had only heard the Cantonese song a few times but could already sing the lyrics fluently. Consumed in her own little world with her off-tune singing, she was completely oblivious to the man walking toward her in the darkness.

"I trudged through the roads, I live and I die..."

She poured the powdered instant coffee into her cup. Ding Li was about to pour in the hot water when she turned her head unconsciously and saw someone already right in front of her. She jolted in shock; the phone resting in her arms dropped.

Xie Lanshan reacted quickly and leaned down to catch the phone in his hands.

He stood back up and wanted to return the phone to Ding Li, yet she frantically took a step back as soon as she saw who it was and shrieked.

This back-end employee already knew that the person in front of her wasn't her senior in the department, but a heartless murderer. This man had not only massacred an entire family, he had even partially skinned the two female victims afterward.

Xiao Liang was the one on shift today and rushed to the coffee room as soon as he heard Ding Li's cries, then turned on the lights. His footsteps also visibly stopped as soon as he saw Xie Lanshan. His expression was complicated.

They were all staring at him. Xie Lanshan could clearly see the distance, fear, and even hatred in their eyes. This wasn't the kind of gaze anyone should give their comrade, or even any average person.

It had been three days since he'd returned, but he rarely had the chance to see his colleagues. Every once in a while, he would pass by someone in the bureau, but they would hurry away to avoid him at all costs.

No words were necessary. He could tell from those eyes that his secret had been exposed. Now he was just a story and laughingstock to everyone.

The attitudes his juniors gave him hurt Xie Lanshan deeply. His eyes reddened in anger, but they were too dry to let out a single tear. Instead, he gave out a self-mocking laugh from his similarly parched throat.

It really was funny. He laughed at how he devoted everything he had to his duty and belief, but these people shoved him into the body of a monster without his consent. After they used him to the end like a tool, they all turned and looked at him in disgust as they begged him to die—once again.

It was the same. Amongst the most unbearable sea of pain, Avici was the worst of them all.

Xie Lanshan once thought that his days beside Mu Kun were the epitome of all suffering only to discover that an even more horrifying fate would later turn him into a monster just like Mu Kun.

After a stiff and awkward silence, Xiao Liang attempted to ease up the atmosphere. He tried to fix his expression and said, "Senior Xie, we all believe you. You aren't the one who betrayed his teammate."

Unfortunately, it was too fake.

These kinds of fabricated lies were even more hurtful than blatant fear and crushed the last bit of his senses. Xie Lanshan's eyes dimmed as he walked out of the office with his head down.

Yet before he could fully step out, he turned back and stood in front of the two juniors.

Ding Li and Xiao Liang both stared in shock, eyes wide. They weren't sure if the lights were too old, but the municipal bureau's lights would often flash as if they were unstable. This handsome face became ghastly under the flickering lights. Within seconds, the juniors noticed that this man was no longer the Senior Xie they once

knew.

“Why is it that everything I do is wrong?! Why do you all never believe in me?!” The angry questions ripped out of his vocal cords until they finally became a most tragic and desperate plea. He begged in tears, “Please... please don’t look at me like I’m a monster...”

The elites of the Blue Foxes were organized and efficient. They may have the authority of a quasi-military division, but their size was only that of a small commando. Including Captain Sui Hong, their members only totaled twenty-two people. Now that Ling Yun was missing, Director Peng gave Sui Hong permission to return to his post.

Clouds of conspiracy haunted the provincial department. Every member of the Blue Fox walked into work with a heavy face. The only good news was the return of their captain. Without delay, Sui Hong quickly summoned the twenty members for a general meeting. His first question was directed to Chi Jin, “Wasn’t Ling Yun supposed to return with you?”

It was too late for Chi Jin to regret his actions now. Out of self-defense and fear of disappointing Sui Hong, he had no choice but to run with the mill and dump all problems onto Xie Lanshan. He collected himself and attempted to explain, “We parted before we went to the airport. He told me that there was something he needed to investigate; I asked him about the details but he said he wasn’t sure right now, and that I should keep quiet and not ask—”

Tu Lang interrupted on the side, “A-Ling and I were chatting about games just before he went missing, and that’s also what he told me.”

Sui Hong frowned slightly; Ling Yun was the youngest of the team, but he would never act out of line on the clock. If there was something that could make him hesitate to speak up, it must be something of immense weight, and the person he wanted to investigate would be someone so close to him that he wouldn’t dare to question them directly. How could this person be Xie Lanshan, a man he wasn’t even close with?

Noticing Sui Hong’s suspicion, Chi Jin felt his heart thump, but he remained calm on the surface and asked, “Captain, do you still not believe Xie Lanshan is the traitor?”

Sui Hong didn’t believe it and only coughed. “A-Lan... isn’t that kind of person.”

There was no point in hiding now, and Xie Lanshan’s identity was the man’s weak spot. Chi Jin raised his voice and said, “But he’s no longer Xie Lanshan! He’s a wolf disguised as a sheep, a monster that was injected with the memories of a special forces agent. His mental state is extremely unstable right now and at the brink of losing control!”

Sui Hong knew that Chi Jin had always been at odds with Xie Lanshan, so he turned to ask the other two members who joined the Thailand operation for opinions. “Tell me what Xie Lanshan has done while he was in Thailand.”

One member answered truthfully, “He refused to act with us and instead spent time in clubs hanging out with prostitutes. The entire street’s sex workers were well acquainted with him by the time he left.”

Another member followed up, “Even though Gold Tooth’s killer was later determined to be Han Guangming, the victim suffered inhumane torture prior to death. He had many broken bones, his organs were damaged, his face was deformed, even his chin was dislocated.”

These words were all true. Gold Tooth’s autopsy report and photos of his body were sent to the provincial branch by Kang Tai, and Xie Lanshan himself admitted to these violent acts.

Tu Lang was a veteran of the team and was even a friend of Xie Lanshan for a brief time. He said, “Cap’n, you’re always defending Xie Lanshan and saying that he’s always one of us, but I still don’t see that. There’s no trace of the Blue Fox spirit in him.”

Sui Hong fell into silence. After a long while, he finally coughed and said, “It’s not that I’m biased toward Xie Lanshan, but the situation right now is that Ling is missing and his cell phone might have fallen into the hands of the enemy. There’s no guarantee that the last message he sent to us was from him. Is there any news from Thailand?”

Another team member spoke up, “The local police have been very cooperative and sent out an arrest order and began searching for clues, but there are no updates yet.”

Tu Lang added, “According to our spies, Mu Kun is back. If Mu Kun’s the one behind all of this, I’m afraid Ling is...”

“There’s no ‘I’m afraid’ here,” Sui Hong said firmly.

“But what if...” Chi Jin’s heart skipped another beat as he added carefully.

“There’s no ‘what-if’s either.” Sui Hong gave another cough, but his eyes and the tone of voice were filled with determination. In the style of his usual charismatic leadership, he said, “The Blue Fox will never give up on any of its comrades. We will grab onto any last bit of hope to save each and every one of our members!”

“Then Xie Lanshan...” Chi Jin’s heart ached for his captain’s sickly body as he regretted his actions. He knew that at this point, one had to die: him or Xie Lanshan. He could only hold himself in and say to Sui Hong, “Director Peng is already very upset with Xie Lanshan, and the municipal bureau only questioned him without any other cautionary measures. Vice Chief Liu has been asking us what they should do about him.”

The meeting room was dead silent. It was bright inside the room, but there was a shadow cast on everyone’s faces. All twenty young Blue Fox officers sat stiffly, waiting for an order from their captain.

Bam! A massive thump came after the meeting door was slammed open.

“Captain Sui, I didn’t let you back into the team for you to hesitate during a critical time like this.” Director Peng walked in, eyes sharp and expression grave. “I’ve heard

everything you all said earlier.”

Clearly, he no longer believed that this man who carried Xie Lanshan’s memories was still Xie Lanshan himself. He gave a loud and firm order to the entire team like a large bronze gong. “We cannot let a criminal on death row like Ye Shen free under the law. We must immediately arrest him and return him to where he belongs!”

“Director Peng...” Sui Hong attempted to argue for his most trusted ex-subordinate, but he couldn’t bring himself to speak those words and swallowed them with the bitter taste of hesitation. Even he wasn’t sure if that man was still Xie Lanshan or not.

“But...” Chi Jin’s lips trembled as he finally spoke of his concern, “Ye Shen now has the body of a special forces agent, I’m afraid capturing him won’t be that easy...”

“Aren’t you all elite forces here too? You’re telling me even with all of you here you can’t bring one man back?” Director Peng interrupted Chi Jin’s words and turned his gaze to Sui Hong, then ordered them harshly, “Ensuring the safety of our citizens is the most important part of our job. We shouldn’t let personal feelings cloud our judgment. Ye Shen is a dangerous criminal who threatens the peace of our society. If he refuses to comply with police orders, shoot him on the spot!”

(iv)

Grayscale value in digital imaging is a concept that represents different shades of an image in pixel values with pure black being the basis of an image. A value of zero represents pure white, while one hundred is black. Most objects in nature have an average value of around eighteen. Yet now, Xie Lanshan was aware that he was growing increasingly closer to one hundred.

He returned home from the municipal bureau and once again sank in the tub as he stared at the ceiling of his bathroom. The sensitive kittens all surrounded him and called out to the man. The little girl in the neighborhood took good care of the cats. He could tell from the weight they’d gained while he was gone.

Xie Lanshan’s gaze was hollow. He stared blankly at the ceiling above until the lights suddenly flickered. The bright ceiling transformed from a bright place to a dangerous, mired land that made the bathroom look almost otherworldly for a moment. Xie Lanshan sank into the water until his face was completely submerged in the tub. He held in his breath and felt the demons in the dark rise. A demon leaned closer to him with his terrifying face until it possessed him—Xie Lanshan was unable to struggle or move away.

The moment before he was about to drown himself, Xie Lanshan heard his phone ring.

He quickly escaped the deadly voice and stepped out of the bathtub, then wrapped a towel around his waist and rushed out to the living room while he was still wet.

Of course it was Shen Liufei.

It almost seemed as if the only two reasons why he still lingered in the mortal world and hadn't fallen into hell were his father and Shen Liufei.

The artist asked through the phone, "I heard about Ling Yun going missing in Thailand today. Are you all right over there?"

The man's voice was as cold and bland as usual, but Xie Lanshan could make out the concern through those words and smiled.

"I'm fine, just a lot of lecturing. You know how complicated those processes in public security are; I'm questioned almost every day. It's all the same questions too. I swear my ears are going to rot." Xie Lanshan didn't want Shen Liufei to worry about him and wiped away his insecurity, then asked, "How's it going over there?"

"Nothing new as of now." There were hundreds of corpses. It would be impossible to immediately identify every one of them. Shen Liufei had found nothing related to his mother. After some thought, he asked again, "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm not wearing clothes right now. Picture that; how about a round of phone sex?" Xie Lanshan was only half joking. He was exhausted, but he didn't want his lover to hang up so quickly.

"You sound very tired." Shen Liufei didn't respond to that request and only said, "I won't hang up the phone. I'll stay here with you until you sleep."

Xie Lanshan chuckled and didn't follow up with his shameless request. Instead, he placed the phone beside his pillow in the bedroom.

The night was silent. He could hear the sounds of Shen Liufei typing on the keyboard and that gentle breathing from the other side. There was no need for words; he knew his lover was always there for him. In a trance at the peak of fatigue, Xie Lanshan finally felt as if he had managed to struggle out of the swamp to breathe in fresh air. He closed his eyes, let his head sink into the soft cotton pillow, and fell into slumber.

The next day Xie Lanshan didn't return to the municipal bureau, calling Tao Jun instead. He didn't feel the need to report to the office every day since he was still on suspension; if they didn't send an arrest warrant, there was no need to clock in.

Xie Lanshan also had a strange feeling that he didn't have much time left, and if he couldn't get an answer now, he would forever be left in the dark.

It was almost old Xie's death anniversary, so he could use it as an excuse to clean up his father's items left in Tao Jun's house. Tao Longyue moved out to his own nest after marriage, so Old Tao was the only one left in the house. The place was quiet and clean, perfect for a private conversation.

Tao Jun's body had been weak since the surgery, so he hadn't returned to the bureau. Tao Longyue was afraid of shocking his old father and didn't tell him about Xie Lanshan's surgery, so Tao Jun was still oblivious to everything and smiled when he saw Xie Lanshan, assuming the young man was just being too rash in Thailand and had made a minor mistake.

“Why did you suddenly remember to come back for your dad’s stuff?” Tao Jun leaned down beneath the yellow light to search for items old Xie had left him inside the attic. The cardboard boxes were all taped up, so Tao Jun took a knife to cut them open.

There weren’t many important items kept in these boxes and Xie Lanshan was the one who said to leave everything here in the past.

“My old man’s death anniversary is coming up.” Xie Lanshan placed a cigarette into his mouth after he answered and blew out a small cloud of mint-scented smoke.

“Don’t talk while you’re smoking like that!” Tao Jun turned around upon smelling the smoke behind him and scolded. What was ironic was that the old Captain Tao was the very brute who had also raised a simple-minded young Captain Tao, but he was always much stricter in mentoring Xie Lanshan. He wanted the young man to inherit old Xie’s honesty and charisma, becoming a cunning but powerful man who could fight against all drug dealers with words and not violence.

Xie Lanshan listened to him and placed the cigarette into the ashtray on the side, still looking at Tao Jun with a complex look on his face.

The man looked much older after his illness. Beneath the dimmed light, Tao Jun’s face looked as if it had been baked until every last bit of water was drained out. His wrinkles were stark on his skin.

The man had aged; the bleak loss of his heroic light was clear on his face. For a second, Xie Lanshan’s heart stung as he thought: *This man who raised me into an adult really is old now.*

He knew how well Tao Jun had treated him over these years.

The white smoke floated in the air like a mist of memories made visible.

“Ah, right, it’s almost old Xie’s death anniversary...” Tao Jun pulled out two old police uniforms and pressed a hand on his old waist. He mumbled, “It’s been so many years now...”

The uniform back then was still the plain dark green ’89 style. Two strips of golden lining decorated the sleeves, proudly complementing the gold lapel pin. Xie Lanshan could imagine his father wearing this uniform; how handsome he would have been in his youth, being the center of attention in town among women. He was often asked to help out with certain things and never turned anyone down, which would upset his mother all the time.

“I had a run-in with Mu Kun again in Thailand.” Xie Lanshan’s heart stung with those memories. Hints of malice flashed within his eyes as he said, “He was the one who sent me a message for me to follow clues to find Gold Tooth.”

Tao Jun’s expression grew grave in that instant as he turned and scolded him, “Why are you still hanging around Mu Kun?!”

Xie Lanshan paused for a few seconds as he met the old man’s gaze and smiled darkly.

“Because Mu Kun told me that he found out who the Apostle was a while back in Hanhai.” He noticed that Tao Jun’s expression changed as soon as he mentioned the word “Apostle.” He took a step forward, then said coldly, “He said the Apostle was a member of the Flaming Triangle in the past.”

(v)

While Xie Lanshan was visiting the old Captain Tao, the young Captain Tao in the municipal bureau received an arrest order for Xie Lanshan from the provincial branch that allowed the police to kill the criminal if he refused to comply.

This was an operation that required the cops to carry guns. The municipal bureau separated the management of guns and ammo, so the violent crimes unit needed to take guns from the weapons storage.

Xiao Liang and Tao Longyue rushed to get their guns together, complaining in their heads along the way. Xiao Liang was hired by the municipal bureau upon graduation and transferred to the violent crimes unit because of his outstanding performance. Even though the cases he had been dealing with in this department were crimes related to murders and drug deals, they rarely ever needed to use guns. The last time he held one was many months ago when they were chasing down Qiao Hui, and only because they were facing a dangerous serial killer. So, until he finally touched a gun, he was in disbelief that the operation required all officers to carry a firearm. He was taken aback and asked Tao Longyue, “Captain Tao, what’s going on? Weren’t we just going to bring Senior Xie back for questioning? Why do we need to carry guns?”

“You think I want to carry one?” Tao Longyue’s expression was grave as if a layer of paint was brushed on his face. “The higher-ups said we’re warning him if he refuses the arrest, and if the warning doesn’t work, we’ll have to shoot him down.”

“Huh? Sh-shoot him down? But he’s not... not entirely that murderer.” Xiao Liang was shocked. According to the law, if a high-profile criminal on death row refused arrest after escaping prison, officers were allowed to execute the criminal on the spot, but this was a comrade they had worked with for three years. Even though Xiao Liang still had mixed feelings facing Xie Lanshan right now, he refused to see his senior colleague die before his eyes.

As if he saw Xiao Liang as a nuisance, Tao Longyue frowned without another word. Instead, he focused on filling his ammo with a stern face. The standard police guns were the QSZ-92, which looked much more aesthetic than the old 52 pistol. It had a louder sound with more powerful bullets, which made it a fit for frontline public security officers. Tao Longyue still remembered the excitement he’d had when he first upgraded his gun. A hero deserved a suitable weapon that they could use well. He would never have thought he would one day be pointing this gun at his best friend, Xie Lanshan.

Inside the attic of the old Tao residence, the dim yellow light showered down like thin rain. Both men stood beneath this shower, their gazes foggy and hearts heavy.

The old cop stood up straight and looked at this boy he had raised. He noticed the boy was now a man, handsome and strong, whose sharp features and gaze were filled with strength.

Tao Jun let out a sigh and took a step forward toward Xie Lanshan, then nodded, "I knew you were going to ask me one day."

Is he confessing? Xie Lanshan was shocked. He'd prepared for the man to deny everything. His heart was stinging in pain, but because he felt suspicion already, he held himself up. Xie Lanshan asked, "So you're the Apostle?"

Tao Jun shook his head; those old eyes were filled with sincerity as he said, "No, I'm not."

Xie Lanshan squinted in disbelief, then asked, "So it's Liu Yanbo?"

Tao Jun shook his head again. "It wasn't old Liu either."

"Then who else could it be?" Xie Lanshan didn't realize until a while later and said in shock, stuttering, "You... you're saying... it was my dad?"

Tao Jun gave him another long sigh and admitted, "Old Xie was the Apostle and I was the one who shot him from behind back then."

"You're lying!" Xie Lanshan couldn't believe this and trembled violently. His face twisted as he attempted to reject everything, growling from his throat, "No way... there's no way my dad could be the Apostle!"

"When old Liu and I discovered old Xie was the Apostle, Liu picked a fight with him. Other drug dealers tried to join in the brawl as well. The situation was dire, so I fired a gun from behind and killed old Xie." Tao Jun's expression was heartbroken. He shook his head and said, "He said just before he passed that he made the wrong decision at the spur of the moment. He said that your mom deserved better than him, that he wanted both you and her to live a better life..."

Recalling now, their situation at home did improve just before old Xie's death. There was less anger on Gao Zhuyin's face, and instead more smiles. Old Xie always said he had received bonuses from his work, but it wasn't until Xie Lanshan himself also began to receive his own that he noticed—it was too much money for such a short period of time.

Tao Jun continued, "He was a brother we'd been through life and death with, so neither of us wanted his heroic deeds to be crushed overnight or for him to carry the name of a traitor even after death. We also didn't want to upset your mother or let you lose your faith or your idol. That's why we hid the truth and said he died in the line of duty while on an operation."

Xie Lanshan didn't speak; he froze without even blinking. His soul had left his body, leaving only his empty flesh.

"Director Peng knows about this too. We turned in proof to him when we returned. If you don't believe me, you can ask him..." Tao Jun added, "I've always regretted

shooting down your father because he was once my best friend... your mother also went mad because of his death, so I've carried this pressure for a long time. I ended up getting into a car crash during a mission later and then dropped out of the front lines."

Was this what Zhu Mingwu meant when he said the man would do something regretful that harmed both himself and the people around him?

"You're lying... you're lying... my dad always taught me to be a good person, a good cop. He wouldn't... he couldn't possibly be the Apostle..." At that moment, his faith finally shattered. Xie Lanshan still stood before this man, but he knew that as soon as he moved, he would crumble into dust. He shook his head mechanically and mumbled, "You're insulting him because he's dead, spilling lies and putting all the blame on him..."

For a moment, that horrifying headache once again acted up. He trembled violently and began seeing hallucinations; shadows blurred before his eyes and sharp noises pierced his ears. Xie Lanshan's hands pressed tightly onto his head that was about to explode. He howled violently from the depths of his lungs; the cry that came out of his throat was violent, desperate, and almost inhuman.

He then picked up the knife resting on the short cabinet, shoved Tao Jun to the wall, and pressed it against the old man's throat. His eyes were bloodshot, and his expression horrible as he desperately tried to fight back, "Tell me you're lying! Tell me that my dad's a good person!"

Tao Longyue took his men and rushed up to the attic. The scene before his eyes stunned him as he fired a warning shot. After the explosive sound, he howled, "Xie Lanshan, put the knife down!"

"You have no idea what happened... your dad's a dirty liar..." Xie Lanshan turned toward Tao Longyue. The sharp knife in his hand pressed even harder into Tao Jun's neck, drawing a line of blood as he said, "He lied to me, to you, and everyone else—"

Bang! A gunshot echoed.

Tao Longyue never intended to harm Xie Lanshan, but he also couldn't let the man do anything to his own father. That was why he fired a shot that only brushed against Xie Lanshan's skin.

Yet at such a close distance, even a touch on the shoulder burned through Xie Lanshan's shirt. The powerful force ripped through his flesh.

The knife in hand dropped to the ground, the violent trembles made him lose his balance. Xie Lanshan coughed up blood and he pressed his injured shoulder as his mouth filled with the taste of iron. He stared at Tao Longyue, stunned that his own friend would pull the trigger on him.

He still remembered how he broke all ten nails and saved this boy from the ruins of an earthquake, how the boy had cried and sworn to be his best friend for life. Soon, he realized these were merely memories that existed within the brain, not memories that belonged to him.

Xie Lanshan let Tao Jun go as he faced countless guns pointing at him. He wiped his face with his bloody hand and then stared silently at Tao Longyue, at everyone.

The silence now that contrasted with his earlier madness sent chills down everyone's spines.

Ever since he found out about that damned surgery, he had been desperately holding on to that bottom line of goodness, but man was born with sin. Some religions said that man was separate from God upon birth. Darwin rallied for the survival of the fittest. A sperm could only make its way into a mother's womb after the death of thousands of its own kind. That was why humanity was complicated and dark; the climb up the stairway to heaven was arduous, but the fall down was surprisingly easy. That was why his attempt to maintain the bottom line was extremely difficult and painful.

Yet at this moment, he finally realized something.

It was too painful to be Xie Lanshan, too painful to be a good person. Once he no longer stubbornly maintained that arbitrary bottom line of morality, all pain would vanish.

After this agonizing pain of drowning, he felt himself finally escaping the mother's womb and found an opportunity to be reborn.

After a moment of exchanging glances, Tao Longyue noticed that the man didn't just change expressions, it was as if his entire existence transformed. Xie Lanshan's eyes cleared up; his gaze looked enchanting. There was passion and a smile on his face, like an alluring siren completely different from the man they once knew.

"Captain Tao, my fellow officers, are you all looking for Ye Shen?" Xie Lanshan raised his bloody hands to surrender, but the elegance made it look as if he was doing a curtain call on a stage.

Without letting the stunned men respond, he said with a smile, "I am he."

(vi)

Shen Liufei, who was still in Thailand, was oblivious to the clouds of conspiracy plaguing Hanhai City now. He didn't find his mother among these countless corpses but made another shocking discovery.

They identified one of the female corpses as Zhuo Tian, according to her ID. After a DNA check, it was confirmed to be the supposed murder victim herself.

In order to chase down Ye Shen, Shen Liufei had been gathering all sorts of information from various channels, so he was also well aware of Zhuo Tian's case. According to the reports, Ye Shen was arrested the same night that Zhuo Tian called the cops. A piece of human skin torn from a young woman was found in his bedroom; fresh blood from the girl's body also covered the living room and bathroom, yet the police searched everywhere within the city and Ye Shen's residence for the girl's corpse—to no avail.

Ye Shen admitted to the murder and even confessed that he was the culprit in the massacre over ten years ago, but he refused to give details about the most important parts of the case: where Shen Liufei's mother and the two other female victims' bodies were hidden.

Now, the missing Zhuo Tian had reappeared in the Golden Triangle region thousands of miles away, tossed into a mass grave dug by stowaways. Shen Liufei took a wild guess that Ye Shen didn't actually kill Zhuo Tian and instead created a fake crime scene and took the blame for her murder for an unknown reason. Zhuo Tian went missing years ago under the same circumstances as Tang Xiaomo—she was kidnapped by human traffickers.

This thought grew like wildfire inside Shen Liufei's mind, and was followed by excitement. Even his perpetual cold face seemed to glow in shock for the first time. He realized that with this sudden twist in Zhuo Tian's case, there would likely be a hidden truth behind his family's murder many years ago.

After hearing about Ling Yun, Shen Liufei also took the opportunity to investigate the missing officer while searching for his mother. However, it wasn't easy to conduct a private investigation on foreign land—he wasn't even a cop back in China. It was thanks to Officer Somsak, who kept him apprised, that he could keep up with investigations.

That was when the search warrant was released to the public: one cab driver called the bureau after seeing the news and said he had actually taken two young men to the airport that day. One of them got out of the cab halfway, then the other quickly asked the driver to tail the one that left.

After solving a groundbreaking human-trafficking case and exposing the internal corruption within the Thai police department, the cops were suffering quite a tough time of transition. They clearly weren't putting their minds on the missing Blue Fox member and sent off the witnesses after taking brief testimonies. Only Somsak contacted Shen Liufei immediately after hearing the news.

Shen Liufei wasn't part of the Blue Fox and couldn't investigate with the Thai police, so Somsak secretly contacted the cab driver and arranged for him to meet with Shen Liufei.

The artist drew a pencil sketch of the young man who got out of the cab from the driver's description.

As expected, it was the Blue Fox's temporary captain, Chi Jin.

One witness account wasn't enough to solve the case. The artist exchanged glances with Somsak and then asked the cab driver, "Can you take us to the place where the missing young man got out of your car?"

The driver took them up the mountains, relying on his memory for directions. Somsak also requested to follow along and even took one of his students. The old cop blamed himself for Ling Yun's disappearance. After all, if he hadn't insisted on keeping the Blue Foxes here out of his own selfishness—though the kidnapped young

men and women wouldn't have been saved if he hadn't—Ling Yun wouldn't have gone missing.

They arrived early in the day under good weather. The sky was blue, the grass green; the mountains in Thailand were as beautiful and vibrant as a painting. From the windows of the car, old temples and huts could be seen nestled among the various exotic plants in the area.

Shen Liufei's eyebrows pressed together the entire trip as he kept his eyes trained outside the window and his lips closed. His attention wasn't on this beautiful scenery, rather, his mind was filled with concern.

He wanted to return home as soon as he found a lead to the old case so he could be by Xie Lanshan's side, but Ling Yun's disappearance also had complicated ties to Ye Shen. He knew that Xie Lanshan must be facing a lot of hardships back home. Perhaps he was even being regarded as a suspect right now, so Shen Liufei needed to help prove Xie Lanshan's innocence.

The sky began to darken. The cab driver received a hefty tip as he waited in the car patiently with a cigarette in his mouth. Shen Liufei and Somsak found the wooden house and entered to investigate it carefully. Shen Liufei found a few bloodstains on the wooden flooring. Even though the place had already been cleaned up, the dark crimson had stained the wood.

He reached out to the stain with his gloved hand, frowning even more. He worried that it may already be too late for Ling Yun.

Somsak was busy taking photo evidence while Shen Liufei was trying to figure out how to wash away suspicion from Xie Lanshan. That was when he heard sounds of multiple car engines from afar almost piercing his eardrums in this quiet mountain region.

No! He gasped quietly. This area was far away from the city and not part of Somsak's jurisdiction. Considering the snail-like pace of the Thai police, they'd been afraid that Ling Yun's corpse would already be tossed into a deserted area by the time they received approval to dispatch a rescue team.

That was why Somsak had brought a student who was also a cop with him. Even though they all had guns in hand, they were only two people against the enemies.

"Call for backup, quick!" Shen Liufei called at Somsak and took the old officer out of the house. They ran toward the driver waiting by the cab, and Shen Liufei said, "Get in!"

The driver didn't understand the rush and instinctively wanted to get in the driver's side when he heard the artist say coldly, "I'm driving."

Almost as soon as the four men got in the car, three other vehicles were already visible from afar. The one in the lead was a black Hummer, and Shen Liufei saw from a glance the man sitting on the passenger side of the car.

He had sharp and handsome features, but there was a burn scar on one side of his face. An eerie but faint smile appeared on his lips. His eyes were hollow, emitting a

bloodthirsty aura that could be felt meters away.

The man had likely set up hidden patrols along the way and had his eyes on Shen Liufei since he decided to stay in the country. It was possible the man had been aware of the artist even earlier than that. Shen Liufei never saw a photo of this rumored drug lord of the Golden Triangle, nor did he ever find the need to investigate, but he knew the moment their eyes met—this man was the source of Xie Lanshan's nightmares, Mu Kun.

Both men's eyes narrowed as they glared at each other like beasts ready to engage in a bloodbath. After a few seconds, Shen Liufei pressed on the gas pedal, made a U-turn, and drove out.

Mu Kun growled, "Follow them! Crush him dead!"

The two sedans behind him could accelerate faster, shooting out like two arrows at his order. They chased Shen Liufei down, attempting to sandwich the car from the front and back and crash the car down the mountains.

Somsak had already called the bureau, but he wasn't sure when backup would arrive. He had no choice but to sit on the passenger's side and wait as the winds buffeted them. The speed of all three vehicles sped up faster and faster; the Toyota cab rushed down the winding mountain roads with sharp turns, the rim of the car's body sometimes scratching against the cement road.

The chase grew fiercer. The old officer could feel adrenaline rush up in his body, turning his stomach upside down. He couldn't believe this sophisticated and artistic Mr. Shen could be such a rough driver down these mountain roads.

Behind him was a driver who obviously wasn't as skilled as Shen Liufei. A sedan lost balance right after a sharp turn and flipped on the roadside.

The second car also slowed down after seeing how they'd already suffered a loss. Mu Kun was enraged as he quickly pulled out a rifle from the back seat and began firing.

Mu Kun had decent aim and shot through one of the rear tires of the Toyota after a few missed shots. After violent trembles that almost caused the car to flip, Shen Liufei managed to find balance and drove forward, refusing to decelerate.

Mu Kun fired another bullet right through the cab driver's head in the back seat. The blood and flesh splashed onto the window in the front.

Somsak and his student twisted around, pulled their guns out and fired back. They also bust through one front tire of the other sedan. The car immediately lost balance; not only did it crash into the side, but it also turned and blocked the way of the Hummer, keeping Mu Kun behind.

Seeing the Toyota drive farther and farther away, Mu Kun pulled out a small rocket launcher from the back seat after cursing out loud.

This area wasn't part of the Golden Triangle's territory, so causing a commotion would not only summon the attention of authorities, it was also dangerous. In addition, the weapons in hand were all left by Guan Nuoqin's subordinates, making

the situation even more complicated. Mu Kun's subordinate wanted to stop his boss, but the drug lord quickly slapped his lackey back. Mu Kun's eyes grew red as if he was going mad—he insisted on killing Shen Liufei today.

Shen Liufei's eyes widened as he saw the madman holding a rocket launcher in the side mirror. He had no choice but to jerk the car right before the man fired to avoid the impact.

After a loud explosion, the rocket launcher shook off a portion of the mountain. The Toyota cab rushed out from the sea of flames at full speed.

A Door Behind the Sun

After getting the wound on his shoulder sewn up, Xie Lanshan was sent to the detention room in the municipal bureau. The situation was too unbelievable to grapple with, so the higher-ups needed to have multiple meetings to decide what to do with him.

In a five-square-meter single cell with cold white light, he faced another cell where his “neighbor” stayed. The neighbor was a gangster who often engaged in drug deals. He’d caused a bit of trouble again, and was captured by Xiao Liang for another round of ethics education. They were the only two people in the detention room. Perhaps bored and lonely, the man directly across from Xie Lanshan grew excited as soon as he saw a newcomer sent in. Once the cops left, the man called out to Xie Lanshan, desperately trying to strike up a conversation.

Xie Lanshan didn’t respond and sat quietly in the corner of the jail cell. His face was pale and still as if his soul had already left his body. He remained in this position for a long time until he seemed to have transformed into a ceramic statue. The only indication of life on him was that bloodthirsty and dangerous gaze from the depths of his eyes.

The neighbor looked to be around thirty, and was slightly shorter and burlier than Xie Lanshan, with a short clean haircut and wide eyes. He looked quite spirited overall, aside from his slightly droopy eyes, which gave him a tired appearance. Unable to bear the silence, he shoved his face in between the metal bars and introduced himself to Xie Lanshan. “Hey, newcomer, my name’s Zang Yifeng. What’s yours?”

Xie Lanshan didn’t respond and closed his eyes. He heard a musical chime from afar that rang every day at 6 P.M. Rumors circulated it was because the shopping center was haunted and a feng-shui master said the only way to soothe the evil air was to play this kind of music at this hour. Xie Lanshan felt a sense of familiarity from the music. If there weren’t any big cases in the bureau, the chimes would mark the time they got off work every day.

The man once again spoke up and shoved his face farther out. “You look fit. What do you do? Can’t possibly be like me and just live in the slums, right?”

Xie Lanshan didn’t respond. He knew that in another five minutes, a route 785 bus would arrive at its stop. The driver was always in a rush and only ever stopped at the last minute as he drove by a stop. Grade school students from an international school would flock around it two hundred meters away. He knew every inch of soil outside

the bureau and every block of pavement on the roads as well.

The detention room of the bureau had no standard uniform, so Xie Lanshan was still wearing his white button-up that hung on his body. His overgrown hair was slightly messy, adding to his disheveled look. Zang Yifeng could see the young man's strong muscles through the opening of his shirt. He stared at Xie Lanshan dumbly as if he'd never seen a man so pretty in his life, and his mouth almost drooled instinctively.

After studying the young man for a while, he made an assumption and continued pestering him, "Is your family still around? You don't look like you're married, but you must have a girlfriend at least."

The mention of "girlfriend" finally seemed to summon Xie Lanshan's soul back. He suddenly opened his eyes and turned to look at the shorter man.

Time froze for those few seconds. Zang Yifeng was shocked; the man's gaze was cold and dark, like that of a murderer.

Then, Xie Lanshan stood up, and ignoring his newly healed wound, he began banging on the metal bars and called out, "Tao Longyue! Tao Longyue!"

Captain Tao of the violent crimes unit was walking right outside the detention rooms; naturally, this commotion summoned him. As soon as he stepped in, he noticed Xie Lanshan's attitude had changed slightly and he addressed him as "Captain Tao."

Tao Longyue saw Zang Yifeng sticking his head out and found a new target to release his anger on. He turned and scolded the man harshly, "Sit back down. Who told you to move?"

"Captain Tao, I have something I'd like to ask you." Their eyes met. Xie Lanshan's attitude was distant and businesslike, almost as though he were ready to bow down to the captain in front of him.

Tao Longyue felt pained; his mouth tasted sour and bitter. He'd known Xie Lanshan for over twenty years. They always had strange nicknames for each other, and he recalled that the latter often referred to him as "ol' Tao" or sometimes "Longyue" when they were closer, but the man was addressing him as "Captain Tao" right now, clearly setting a hard boundary between the two.

Tao Longyue opened his mouth with difficulty. "What's up?"

Xie Lanshan looked as if he didn't notice the awkwardness and displeasure on his old friend's face and only asked, "What's today's date?"

Tao Longyue said, "The second."

Xie Lanshan's expression changed. He asked, "It's February already?"

Tao Longyue almost wanted to laugh and thought the man had grown dumber sitting in this room. But as soon as he remembered their situation right now, he held himself in and said with an agonizing expression, "Of course it's February."

Xie Lanshan grew nervous after he thought about this and asked, "Where's Shen Liufei? Where is he?"

Tao Longyue let out a sigh and said, "He's still in Thailand, I think. Do you think he wouldn't come to see you if he was already back?"

His heart sank as he had a terrible premonition. Xie Lanshan shook his head and said, "There's no way that he's still in Thailand!"

Shen Liufei hadn't returned. The man would never take back his words at a time like this, knowing that Xie Lanshan was in danger.

He had a strange feeling that something must have happened to Shen Liufei.

Tao Longyue saw Xie Lanshan's face was in shock, then remembered what he wanted to tell the man. He said, "Good timing. I also wanted to tell you that the old cop you knew in Thailand got into some trouble."

"Trouble?" Xie Lanshan's heart skipped a beat, his eyes widened.

"He's dead. They've already found his corpse. The car he was in fell down from a mountain road; he was buried alive by half of the mountain. Including that Officer Somsak, they discovered three bodies there." Tao Longyue sighed again and said, "The police over there say it's likely that Mu Kun had something to do with the case."

Xie Lanshan fell into silence again, his body frozen behind the bars. Tao Longyue called out to him a few times, but he gave no response.

The young captain felt his phone ring; it must be Su Mansheng calling him to visit Old Tao in the hospital. Old Tao knew about Xie Lanshan's situation now. After a fit of rage, he'd fallen ill once again.

Tao Longyue didn't dare to ignore his wife and trudged out of the detention room. After taking a few steps, he stopped and turned back to Xie Lanshan, who seemed to have come back to his senses and returned the gaze.

Xie Lanshan's hair had grown down to his shoulders, making the already handsome man look even more attractive in a way that transcended gender. There was a perpetual but faint smile on his face that looked almost cocky, the dimple by his mouth flashed as if he was an otherworldly creature of beauty. The man's dramatic looks stunned Tao Longyue, but he was also deeply regretful that he didn't notice these changes earlier.

"A-Lan, I..." A faint whimper came out of Tao Longyue's throat, but he still said, "I don't intend on harming you, you're always going to be my best friend."

Xie Lanshan studied Tao Longyue almost arrogantly until he lifted the corner of his lips and said, "Sure."

He sat back down in the corner of his cell, his face still blank and unmoved. He rested his elbow on his knee and pressed his chin on his arms.

There was only one thought in his mind right now: he needed to leave this place and find Shen Liufei.

The phone rang again. Tao Longyue gave Xie Lanshan one last glance, let out a long sigh, and rushed out of the room with his hands in his pockets.

After confirming that Captain Tao had left, Zang Yifeng turned toward Xie Lanshan once again and stuck his head out, asking in disbelief, "Are... y-you a cop?"

Xie Lanshan didn't look at him and asked, "Why are you here?"

Zang Yifeng scratched his head and said, "No big deal, just sold some drugs."

Xie Lanshan lifted an eyebrow, "Sold some drugs?"

Zang Yifeng confessed, "Red ice, about a thousand grams."

Xie Lanshan pressed his eyebrows at the sound of those two words. A thousand grams of red ice was enough to warrant a death sentence here. He asked coldly, "You think this isn't a big deal?"

Zang Yifeng laughed, "I sold fake stuff, homemade by me. You can't even tell from the outside, but it doesn't actually harm ya."

Xie Lanshan said coolly, "Law enforcement defines the selling and possession of fake narcotics the same as the attempted sale and possession of actual narcotics. Even if you don't get on death row, you'd be spending your life making out with the prison cell."

He was purposely scaring the thug. It was rare to find fake narcotic cases in the country, so the actual sentence for these crimes was still a topic of hot debate, even in court.

Zang Yifeng called out loudly once again but was quickly hushed up by Xie Lanshan.

"Don't be so dramatic. Stop looking so shifty-eyed." Xie Lanshan saw the surveillance camera diagonally above him from the corner of his eyes as he said quietly, "If you don't want to get on death row, I can help you get out of here."

(ii)

Almost as soon as the 6 P.M. chime rang, Zang Yifeng cried out, "Mister Policeman! Hey, good ol' Mister Policeman! He's gonna die! He's gonna die!"

Xiao Liang was on shift today and rushed in at the noise. He called out while attempting to look intimidating and scolded, "Don't call me old. Do I look older than you? What's going on?"

He looked toward the direction Zang Yifeng was yelling at and saw Xie Lanshan on the ground, his face pale and lips slightly trembling. The man was covered in blood. His shirt and sleeves were all stained crimson.

Xiao Liang was stunned by this bloody scene before him and asked, "What happened?"

Zang Yifeng grabbed onto the bars of his cell and stared in horror at Xie Lanshan's cell. He said dramatically, "I don't know... the blood just exploded all of a sudden and he also fell to the ground. Did an artery pop or something?"

That gunshot wound wasn't a small one and Xiao Liang could never have imagined that Xie Lanshan was the one who had reopened his injury, so he assumed the man's artery had been nicked. He wouldn't allow even a stranger to die in their detention room, let alone a colleague of three years.

“Senior Xie... hey, hold still, I’m calling the ambulance right now...”

As soon as Xiao Liang’s hand reached his shoulder, Xie Lanshan suddenly opened his eyes. A flash of ferocity crossed his eyes as he attacked. Xiao Liang was no match against his former colleague—even if he was equipped to take on the man in an ambush, chances were he would still be the one who ended up on the ground.

After a few seconds, Xiao Liang’s limbs were locked and immobilized. Xie Lanshan’s eyes were slightly red. He grabbed the young cop’s throat and shoved him into the walls of the detention center harshly. After two hard knocks, Xiao Liang lost consciousness. Xie Lanshan reached into the young man’s pocket and pulled out a hundred-yuan bill, then tossed the man on the ground.

“Hey, what about me?” Zang Yifeng reached out a hand and waved wildly to get Xie Lanshan’s attention. “What about me?”

“Selling fake, harmless drugs would just be considered scamming. You won’t die.” Xie Lanshan still refused to look at the man and was ready to leave. If he had been the same Xie Lanshan in the past who would never break a promise, he would have helped the man, but he was Ye Shen now and didn’t share the same morals.

“I hang out in the Gantangzi region. I can help you out if you get me out of here.” Gantangzi was a small corner in Hanhai City where the criminals and drug dealers loitered. Zang Yifeng seemed to be convinced he was going to be put on death row and kept calling out to Xie Lanshan, but the man disappeared without turning his head.

Xie Lanshan rushed out of the municipal bureau and the people on duty in the surveillance room quickly called the cops after realizing it was a jailbreak. For a moment, the entire bureau was loud from blaring sirens. Just prior, the bureau had been rather quiet with no pressing cases and most people had maintained a regular nine-to-five schedule. In other words, there shouldn’t be anyone on duty during overtime right now, but Tao Longyue paid extra attention to this case involving his buddy and had lingered in the bureau at this hour. He stood up as soon as he heard the sirens signaling Xie Lanshan’s escape.

Captain Tao rushed out of the bureau. He sprinted past all of his bruised colleagues on the ground who had failed to stop Xie Lanshan.

He saw his buddy dart out across the street and followed behind, calling out, “A-Lan! Don’t repeat your mistakes. I’ll shoot if you keep running!”

At that moment, a crowd of children walked out of the primary school campus. Tao Longyue had his gun pointed at Xie Lanshan when he noticed the man suddenly picked up a young boy. He turned around, stood still, and held the boy up in front of him.

The two men’s eyes locked on each other; Xie Lanshan’s gaze was filled with rage and malice, and the man no longer resembled a righteous cop. Tao Longyue was both shocked and extremely disappointed. He could never imagine that boy who’d risked his life to save him from an earthquake years ago would now dare to take a child

hostage.

Xie Lanshan held the boy up with his uninjured arm and ran. Tao Longyue couldn't fire in fear of harming innocents and could only run after the man. Then, a bus suddenly drove by and stopped right in front of him, blocking his way.

Xie Lanshan's route of escape was carefully planned based on his knowledge of the area. By the time the bus drove off and Tao Longyue could dash out, Xie Lanshan and the little boy had already disappeared.

In a dark corner on the street, Xie Lanshan placed the stunned little boy down. He lowered his head and looked at the boy expressionlessly.

The child had never had a gun pointed at him nor been kidnapped before, so he was scared speechless and forgot to even call out for help. He could only look up and stare at the man covered in blood. Almost as soon as he looked, a strange but childish instinct told him that this man wasn't as scary as he thought—in fact, the man's gaze was both benevolent and sorrowful.

Briefly, the kindness in Xie Lanshan's consciousness took over as he touched the boy's hair. He whispered, "I'm sorry."

The boy still hadn't fully processed the two vastly contrasting personalities, but he soon realized the man was already walking away.

Night fell on the eve of the Lunar New Year. Darkness quickly consumed the warm light of dusk and fell on the city. The child noticed that the silhouette of the man looked lonely. The man pressed on his injury, but fresh blood still continued to gush from between his fingers and dribbled onto the ground. It was almost cinematic, like an injured swordsman who trudged along the pavement with a broken blade and tired horse all by himself.

Yet Xie Lanshan knew he was even more pitiful than those fictional heroes. He had no sword to wield and no horse to lean on as he disappeared into the night.

Gantangzi was a peculiar place in Hanhai City. Bars and clubs filled the streets; some saunas and hairdressers also hid among the shadows as they all engaged in shady businesses.

These places would do virtually anything for money.

The largest club in Gantangzi was called the Eastern Palace, which was a high-end and large establishment. The owner had some powerful sponsors with government affiliation, which was why the business was able to control this area and could continue operations without trouble from public security. Most police officers also turned a blind eye when they passed by the area.

Sex work and the drug trade were closely connected industries, especially with meth and other narcotics that could serve as good aphrodisiacs. That was why the drug dealers tended to be much more obnoxious and active in this area where the police turned a blind eye.

Xie Lanshan knew he had nowhere else to go, and Zang Yifeng's words reminded him that the best place to hide right now was in the lawless land of Gantangzi.

He ran from the municipal bureau and had no more money aside from the one hundred yuan he had taken out of Xiao Liang's pocket. He had no choice but to accept his fate and found a small hostel to stay in.

The hostel was hidden in the corner of the streets; its walls were stained and it looked rather insignificant from the outside. A large and fanciful advertisement board right outside the door said the cheapest room for a night was ninety-nine yuan. Xie Lanshan stood in front of the door, pondered a little, and decided to negotiate with the owner. He wanted to at least secure a space for one night, then find some needles, alcohol, and cotton to treat his wound.

The owner of the hostel was a woman who looked to be in her thirties but was actually nearing fifty. Despite her age, she still maintained her looks and wore vibrant makeup; her long hair also made her look more attractive. The hostel offered other special services and most customers weren't normal residents. The owner didn't mind the blood on Xie Lanshan nor did she check his ID, easily letting him check in.

As soon as their eyes met under the suggestive red light, seduction filled the atmosphere and passion bubbled beneath a layer of ice.

"Thank you—what brand of perfume do you use? It smells nice." Xie Lanshan leaned forward toward the owner and slowly closed his eyes, acting like a bee interested in a sweet flower. The skin on his eyelids was thin but clean, the dim light fell into his eye sockets like flower petals on his face. He smiled faintly and chatted up the owner using his good looks.

The owner was already very interested in this pretty man, so she didn't hesitate to hold up a thick book for Xie Lanshan to write his name for check-in as she brushed by his hands.

Xie Lanshan hesitated a little when he opened up the book, but finally wrote two words: Ye Shen.

It was a foreign but familiar name that seemed to have sliced through the past and restarted a new life for him. Xie Lanshan lowered his head to sign, allowing the long bangs on his forehead to cover his mournful eyes. His fingers trembled as he wrote, his whole body also shivered slightly. He could feel his heart beat in pain with every stroke of the pen. There used to be two souls that brawled inside him as they struggled to gain control of the body, and finally, only one survived.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the one he wanted that lived.

The sweet words exchanged with the woman earned Xie Lanshan a free dinner, clean clothes, and surgical needles. Brawls among druggies were common in the area, and in order to keep her business alive, the owner kept first-aid supplies for her customers.

Inside the room of the hostel, Xie Lanshan clenched his teeth beneath the dim light and slowly resealed the injury on his shoulder. Because he was on the run right now, he couldn't go to the hospital on his own and had no choice but to treat the injury himself.

The needle passed through his flesh like a worm; the thread slid through messily, but it stopped the bleeding.

Xie Lanshan lay on the bed and panted heavily after finishing the job.

Shen Liufei's corpse wasn't at the scene of the crash, so there were only two possibilities left: the man had either escaped or fallen into the hands of Mu Kun.

He didn't think Mu Kun would keep Shen Liufei around for no reason, nor would he stay in Thailand with no plans. The drug lord must already be in Hanhai and was preparing to recapture him. Xie Lanshan needed to take the initiative and find the drug lord first.

(iii)

The news of Xie Lanshan's jailbreak quickly made its way up to the provincial branch. Director Peng was enraged. He was now convinced the dependable antidrug officer Xie Lanshan had sacrificed his life in the Golden Triangle and that the man they were dealing with truly was the death-row criminal Ye Shen. He immediately asked someone to send out a grade-B arrest warrant with a bonus of fifty thousand yuan, but almost as soon as they sent the warrant out, an even more worrisome event occurred.

Red ice began to flood the drug market and quickly overtook the entire province at the speed of an unstoppable wildfire, with Hanhai City being the biggest hot spot of the trade.

Tao Longyue panicked as soon as he learned of the provincial branch's decision. The public announcement on the warrant was rather conservative in wording, but the documents circulating within the public security departments clearly stated that Xie Lanshan was an extremely dangerous criminal. The order was still the same—gun use was allowed if the man refused to comply.

Captain Tao was worried. He could still give Xie Lanshan a chance to bring him in alive if he was facing his old friend, but if Xie Lanshan left Hanhai City to search for Shen Liufei, no one would care about sparing his life. No matter how strong the man was, he had no weapons to protect himself. How could he fight against fully armed police forces? In the worst-case scenario, a bullet would pierce his skull and his corpse would be left on the streets.

Song Qilian also panicked as soon as she heard about this. She met up with Tao Longyue and said she shared his sentiment, then offered a possible solution. They could only hope that Xie Lanshan was still in Hanhai right now so they could lure him out using his mother.

Song Qilian said, "We can bring Mrs. Gao from her facility and ask the bureau to contact the TV station. They can do an episode on a doctor transferring all patients to a new hospital, then do a short documentary on the channel. We can ask for the video to be spread online, ensuring that a-Lan sees it..."

Tao Longyue understood her plan to lure the man out with his mother, yet he was still unsure and said, looking conflicted, “Do you think he’ll still show up like that? He’s... he’s no longer...”

Tao Longyue rubbed the scar on the side of his head and sighed, unable to tell the woman, “He’s no longer Xie Lanshan.”

Song Qilian also fell into silence. She was mournful and regretful; if she had destroyed the document that exposed Xie Lanshan’s identity, if she hadn’t chosen to expose the truth at Tao Longyue’s wedding... perhaps this secret could have been kept safe and none of this would have happened.

The wisdom of Buddha said that a heart filled with struggle is the nature of a sinful mortal, while a heart filled with clarity is the true form of a wise buddha.

Neither she nor Tao Longyue was sure if the Xie Lanshan right now was the sinful mortal or the benevolent Buddha. But Song Qilian was certain that if this man still had even one bit of Xie Lanshan’s soul in him, he would visit his mother.

Gantangzi was a hub filled with prostitutes and was nearby a famous drug trade street. With the latest arrest warrant, even the most powerful government backing wouldn’t be able to protect Xie Lanshan. The police paid visits to every neighborhood in the area, the sirens loud outside the windows. Xie Lanshan knew he couldn’t hide anymore.

He also knew that Mu Kun must have seen his arrest warrant, and the sudden red-ice outburst in the market was also bait the drug lord was using to lure him out. If he could track down the sources of that red ice, he could find Mu Kun.

Xie Lanshan might have arrived without a penny, but he left with something else in his pocket. It was impossible to walk around in modern society without money. To find Shen Liufei, he snatched a bit of money from the hostel owner and left a note promising to return it.

He left in the night after dropping off the note. Night lights in Gantangzi shimmered as clubs and stores began to open up for business. The similar reddish and pink ambience almost looked like the blush of a fine maiden. The cops had been more diligent lately, which meant more active clubs were doomed. Thankfully, the spirit never faded; the red-light district was still a robust area that never slept.

Xie Lanshan ran into a loud crowd. The grade-B arrest warrant had already spread across the internet. Afraid that someone would recognize him, Xie Lanshan quickly dodged into a corner of a street, only to bump right into another person as soon as he turned.

He looked up and was surprised to find Zang Yifeng, the familiar face he’d met in the detention room.

The man also recognized him and said in surprise, “Oh, it’s you?”

Almost as soon as he spoke, Xie Lanshan turned and put him into a head hold, then pushed the poor man’s head to the wall. Xie Lanshan asked coldly, “Were you tailing

me?”

Zang Yifeng cried out and explained angrily, “How could I? Gantangzi is only so damn big, and I already told you I hang out around this place!”

Xie Lanshan loosened his grip after realizing there was some truth in those words, but his gaze was still cold when he asked, “How did you get out?”

Zang Yifeng swung his twisted arms and said, upset, “You screwed me over last time! Those drugs I sold were fake, plus I didn’t even get to sell them when I was caught, so they couldn’t even convict me of scamming. So of course they released me after I went through some disciplinary action.”

Xie Lanshan remembered the man was a local who often engaged with the mainstream businesses in the area. He softened his expression and asked, “You know this place well. Do you know where the drug deals tend to happen around here?”

Zang Yifeng thought about it for a moment before answering, “I do know a woman who lives off selling those smokes. I think she used to hang around some club here. The club’s boss is also a woman who was rumored to have gotten some connections with a big drug dealer, so now they specialize in selling red ice...”

“A club?” He immediately thought of Miss T, Tang Qinglan. Xie Lanshan frowned and asked, “Club Tequila?”

“Yeah, that, tacky whatever it’s called...”

“Can you take me to her right now?”

“I could, but you have to promise me something first...” Zang Yifeng scratched his nose and glanced over with a tough expression, ready to bargain.

He said that his fake red ice messed with the market here and upset the big drug dealers locally. The dealers threatened to kill him, so he needed some money to get himself out. He could tell from the detention center that Xie Lanshan was a man who could fight, so he wanted the man to help him get the funds to escape.

They left as soon as the deal was struck. While the sky was still dark, Zang Yifeng took Xie Lanshan through the narrow alleyways and streets like rats going through tunnels. After about thirty minutes, they finally stopped in front of a rental house. The units inside were very compact; each one was filled with foul smells and windows that looked as if they were rusted. All the doors were chipping paint. The hallways were all dark, like the surrounding streets—clearly this was a place that could only exist in the slums.

“That woman used to live in a mansion and wore expensive jewelry every day, but ever since she got addicted to drugs, her life just kept going downhill until she ended up here...” Zang Yifeng knocked on the door while shaking his head, then called out gently, “A-Xia? A-Xia?”

The door wasn’t even closed and opened up at the knock.

The scene behind the door was frightening; the woman only wore underwear and cried out as soon as she saw two men walk in. She rushed forth, barefoot on the cold concrete flooring.

She was still in her drug psychosis, but she had no money to speak of, so the woman was forced into madness. Her face was pale and almost menacing, her eyes bloodshot in desperation. She kept biting her tongue, and fresh blood seeped between her white teeth like she was a horrific demon.

Suicide by biting one's tongue off wasn't as easy as depicted on television shows, but it was highly possible for someone to die from massive blood loss or air-pipe blockage from the tongue. Xie Lanshan noticed the woman had lost her mind as she opened her mouth wide, looking as if she was ready to do exactly that. He quickly stuck his pinkie finger into her mouth without hesitation.

Red ice was a drug that made a person easily irritable; the psychosis also temporarily gave the woman explosive strength. She clenched her teeth quickly and a crisp cracking sound echoed. Xie Lanshan's pinkie was broken in that moment.

Finally able to vent it out, the woman stopped attempting to harm herself and instead bit down harder on the man's finger. Xie Lanshan frowned as he withstood the immense pain, raised the other hand, and knocked the woman out with an uppercut to the nape of her neck.

The event occurred within the blink of an eye. It was so fast that Zang Yifeng didn't even have time to react and watched it all happen on the side. He was very puzzled and shocked at Xie Lanshan's actions. He was a criminal on the run, wanted by the police. According to the description on the warrant, he was a monster, a demon, a bastard who wouldn't even hesitate to betray his comrades, yet this same man willingly sacrificed a finger just to save the life of a drug addict he had never met before.

Xie Lanshan carefully let the unconscious woman down on the ground, then looked at his own finger. His skin was peeled, and the bone broken; the deep teeth marks were covered in fresh blood mixed with the woman's saliva.

"Aren't you scared..." Zang Yifeng stuttered as he asked, stunned, "scared that she might have AIDS...?"

"I didn't even think about it." The woman had gone mad; it was obvious she wouldn't be able to answer his questions. Xie Lanshan calmly washed his injury and poured a cup of warm water for the woman.

"I have meds that can help deal with her situation!" Zang Yifeng pulled out a bottle of detox drugs from his pocket and took out two white pills. He took the glass of warm water and carefully fed it into the woman's mouth.

Xie Lanshan asked, "You keep the meds around?"

After moving the unconscious woman onto the sofa, Zang Yifeng's expression shifted and he finally said, after letting out a sigh, "I used to do drugs too. These were for me."

His gaze flickered around as he spoke, his lips trembled, and he breathed heavily as if there was a tragic story about to be told.

After realizing they would be leaving empty-handed, the two men didn't wait for the woman to wake up, and turned back. Zang Yifeng was still in shock at Xie Lanshan's "heroic deed" and rambled the entire way back.

"You don't look as scary as what the arrest warrant said. I believe you were a cop just from what you did earlier, so then why are your bosses and colleagues trying to arrest you?"

Xie Lanshan was getting annoyed at the questions and turned around to shoot a frigid gaze at him.

The few streetlights were dim. The moon above them shifted to a position that cast a glow beneath those bloodthirsty eyes. Zang Yifeng swallowed the rest of his words and didn't dare to speak up again. Those eyes were inhumanly icy. Zang Yifeng began suspecting this man was filled with contradictions. He seemed to contain both the soul of a hero and criminal inside him, like a saint and demon.

Xie Lanshan couldn't stay in one spot too long as a wanted criminal and was in a rush to find a place to stay overnight. That was when he spotted something on the TV inside a small grocery store.

The news was about a doctor at an island hospital who privately transferred a dozen or so patients to another location. Supposedly the doctor wanted to give the patients a better place to treat their illnesses—of course, all family members were notified and agreed to the transfer. Another side condemned the doctor for violating professional conduct and engaging in a secret negotiation with another hospital. The result was a heated debate on the internet and the news channels.

Xie Lanshan didn't have the time to check the news lately, but he didn't expect to see his mother in this situation.

Regardless of where the news was being reported, all cameras had gotten a shot of a beautiful but thin woman. Gao Zhuyin seemed unable to accept being transferred into another hospital and cried on camera, saying, "I want to see my son! Where's my son? Where's my a-Lan?"

Xie Lanshan paused before the TV in the store and saw his mother breaking down in front of the camera. She was tied up like a criminal and then forcefully taken away by medical staff.

He heard that these dozen patients were now in Puren Hospital's psych department.

Zang Yifeng didn't dare hurry Xie Lanshan. He could clearly see the man clenching his fists tightly, the veins on the back of his hand popping until his whole body trembled.

Every shrill cry from Gao Zhuyin was like a knife slicing into his heart. Xie Lanshan was enraged at the hospital's careless actions, but his gaze couldn't help but soften as he looked at his mother. His dry and cold eyes finally regained a bit of light and moisture.

He told himself that he might never return, that he needed to pay her one last visit before he left.

The police searches had been more frequent lately, so the hotels around Gantangzi weren't safe. Thankfully, Zang Yifeng had a wide network of connections, and after two phone calls, he borrowed a place that was rather quiet. It was a standard two-bedroom unit. The furnishings were minimal, but at least they now had a place they could stay and hide for a while.

Xie Lanshan had been suffering from a low fever the last few days due to minor infections from his injuries. After getting his finger bitten by that woman, he'd finally reached his limit. He didn't even stop to wash himself and headed straight into the bedroom. He walked by the bedside and dropped onto the mattress.

He was tired both physically and mentally and fell asleep the moment he closed his eyes. His breathing was shallow and he almost looked dead.

"Huh? Xie Lanshan? Officer Xie?"

Zang Yifeng left the room after receiving no response and walked into the kitchen. He pulled out a knife and stepped beside Xie Lanshan once again.

Zang Yifeng held the knife with two hands above his head, eyes locked on Xie Lanshan on the bed. His smooth-talking demeanor from earlier vanished, replaced by an unhinged and enraged expression; the flames of revenge burned in his eyes.

Yet before the blade could drop, a loud police siren blared outside.

Xie Lanshan instinctively woke up as soon as he heard the sound and jumped from the bed. He didn't notice the panicking Zang Yifeng with the knife and instead turned to look out the window.

It was already two in the morning, but the red lights of the police cars blazed through the night sky like a torch. One after another, police cars began ringing their sirens in the middle of the night and darted out from the quiet streets toward the direction of the Hanhai City's municipal bureau.

The police cars in the Hanhai bureau were modest Chevys, but these were heavy Land Rovers that were clearly from the provincial branch. Aside from the usual blue and gold emblem of the police, each one also had a characteristic fox symbol painted on the side.

A mass deployment like this was unprecedented.

Xie Lanshan quickly realized these fancy police cars weren't here for him, which meant something game-changing must have happened within the Blue Fox.

(iv)

This was supposed to be an average winter night, with strong winds and a cloudy sky. Hanhai City Bureau Officer Xiao Zhang had just brewed another cup of coffee for himself during his shift and returned to his desk. Just as he was about to sit down and continue playing solitaire, he realized the computer froze.

Xiao Zhang panicked as he set the coffee down and saw a window pop up on the frozen screen after a minute. Below it were two times—one was the current time, and

another was a countdown of seventy-two hours.

Xiao Zhang immediately realized that someone had hacked the municipal bureau's internal network. Cyberattacks happened every so often in the city, but they mostly targeted businesses and other nongovernmental agencies. It was a first for a hacker to be so brave and shameless as to attack the public security department. Xiao Zhang stared at the video on the screen; the camera was filming in a place that looked like a storage unit, which was dark and empty. At the center of the screen was a heavily injured young man tied to a chair.

Xiao Zhang paused the video while it was facing the man in the chair, zoomed in, and opened his eyes wide in shock. The man was the missing Blue Fox team member, Ling Yun.

He immediately contacted the chiefs of the municipal bureau, who then made a call to the provincial branch and shook the entire Blue Fox team with this piece of news. All members were called on duty at that instant. With Captain Sui Hong personally leading the team, all vehicles drove out to Hanhai City's bureau.

The hacker came prepared and set safety measures to protect himself. The technicians in the bureau attempted to track down the IP address, only to discover it led them to a foreign website's server. Ever since Mu Kun overtook Guan Nuoqin's territories, he also extended his reach to the dead drug lord's old businesses as well.

At 4 A.M., something new finally appeared in the video. A handful of men armed with weapons walked into the storage room. The leader of the group ordered a subordinate to bring a chair over so that he could sit down beside Ling Yun.

"Zoom in on that man." The Blue Fox officially took charge of this case, so Sui Hong ordered the tech expert Sun Jian from his team to analyze the video.

The screen was cropped to leave only the man's face visible, which was handsome but menacing, mad, and evil. His eyes even glowed with an unearthly demonic light.

Sui Hong recognized him, every member of the Blue Fox recognized him. This was the drug lord the team had been chasing after for three years: Mu Kun.

The drug lord faintly sneered as he moved his mouth to say something. There was some background noise in the video, so it was difficult to hear what Mu Kun was saying. Sui Hong frowned and said, "Reduce the background noise."

Mu Kun seemed to have known he was finally the center of attention and once again spoke up slowly, "Long time no see, Captain Sui."

He stood up, took out a knife from his pocket, and walked behind Ling Yun. The man grabbed Ling Yun's throat while he sliced down the young man's ear. The blade was sharp, but almost as if he was doing it out of malice and revenge, the drug lord slowly dug into the flesh to drag out the torturous process.

Ling Yun knew his captain and comrades were watching over him through the computer screen right now. He was afraid to make them worry and withstood the urge to cry out, beg for mercy, or shed tears. He was still a prisoner of his own flesh; the agonizing pain was difficult to withstand. It was too painful. Hoarse growls came out

from his throat as he trembled and twitched until the chair beneath him shook with his body.

It didn't take long for Ling Yun's ear to be cut off. The freshly cut ear was still twitching on Mu Kun's hand as the drug lord laughed out loud.

Even the video seemed to reek with the smell of blood through the screen. All of the Blue Fox members were stunned and shaken. Tu Lang's eyes reddened as he pounded on the table in frustration. Sui Hong closed his eyes as his body trembled in anger.

Chi Jin stepped away from the crowd, nervously shaking behind his teammates. He could almost feel the agonizing pain that Ling Yun was going through right now. He was one second away from exposing his pain and regret, but managed to quietly shoulder it all as soon as he laid eyes on Sui Hong.

"Captain Sui, didn't you say the Blue Fox leaves no member behind? Why hasn't anyone come to save your teammate yet?" Mu Kun's mood lifted after the torturous act as he perversely licked the blood on the knife. He then turned slightly toward the camera and said coldly, "Let Xie Lanshan come find me. Or else I will kill your man by the time the countdown reaches zero."

As soon as he finished, Mu Kun slashed the knife across Ling Yun's face, leaving another bloody gash. The blood rolled down his cheek into the corner of his lips, then down his chin. This vibrant and handsome young man was already completely destroyed inside and out. His kneecaps had shattered; flesh and blood clung to his pants. The young man knew that he was at his limit, and even if he managed to survive, he would be disabled for life.

Regardless, his eyes were still filled with a bright and determined glow that showed no sign of yielding to evil from start to finish.

Mu Kun informed Sui Hong that he would be live streaming Ling Yun's torture throughout the entire countdown. After seventy-two hours, he would slice Ling Yun's throat and kill the young man.

The drug lord despised all members of the Blue Fox, with Xie Lanshan being the only exception.

Now that the case had elevated to the scale of foreign diplomacy, the Thai police could no longer sit back and finally investigated the case with diligence. After another round of negotiations, the Thai police forces finally sent in all relevant evidence, including the cab driver's testimony to the Hanhai City bureau. In addition, they also mailed the physical evidence discovered at the scene of the car crash. Amidst the piles of evidence, Tao Longyue recognized the bullet necklace that Xie Lanshan always carried around—which was the very one Xie Lanshan had gifted to Shen Liufei.

The testimony from the cab driver was clear and straightforward. He'd taken Ling Yun to tail another short-haired young man on the day Ling Yun went missing. After checking the timestamps, they confirmed it was the same time Ling Yun had sent Tu Lang his last text message right before he disappeared.

However, the evidence from Thailand was still too little to be decisive. Tu Lang said in frustration, “Don’t they do forensic sketches or something over there? The guy said they were trailing a young man with short hair. Just how are we going to find him without any other clues?”

The one thing that was certain was that because Xie Lanshan’s hair was grown out now, he clearly didn’t fit the description of the driver’s testimony. Judging from the way Mu Kun had spoken about him, the man also had never betrayed his teammates to join with the drug lord.

Sui Hong recalled that Xie Lanshan had once questioned him in tears: *Why is everything I do wrong? Why don’t any of you ever believe in me?*

He also remembered Xie Lanshan admitting once from the bottom of his heart: *The Blue Fox will forever be my home, and you will always be my captain.*

Sui Hong coughed a few times and closed his eyes in pain, regretting that he never gave his most beloved subordinate his full trust. He allowed his appearance as a murderer to become the irredeemable sin of the young man, and he allowed it to wipe away all the hard work and honor Xie Lanshan once had.

“We were wrong about a-Lan.” Sui Hong sighed in between his coughs and said, “We were all wrong about a-Lan...”

Chi Jin was still afraid that he would be found out. He was living his life on the edge lately, only hoping to get by each day as long as he could. He said, “If the message he gave Tu Lang is fake, then what Ling Yun said about one of us being a traitor must also be a part of Mu Kun’s plan to make us suspect each other. Perhaps Ling Yun discovered Mu Kun’s hideout and trailed him, but was found out and fell into the hands of the enemy.”

Sui Hong opened his eyes and looked at the young man with a rare and inexplicable expression. With that gaze on him, Chi Jin could feel his heart thump from guilt while he attempted to keep himself calm.

That was when someone knocked on the door to the meeting room. Tao Longyue walked in and reported, “We have a plan to lure Xie Lanshan out.”

(v)

Shen Liufei finally woke after hearing a whisper calling him. He opened his eyes to be met with a bright light from the window.

He held up a hand to cover his eyes and then reopened them after he grew used to the bright light. When his eyes had adjusted, he looked over at the familiar face beside him and said, “It’s you.”

Duan Licheng smiled and asked, “Finally awake?”

Even before his memories were transferred, Shen Liufei had always treated this man as his brother. His phone number was the first on Shen Liufei’s contacts list, making them very close friends. Duan Licheng rushed to Thailand as soon as he

received the news from the hospital. After spending some extra effort and money, he quietly took the injured man from the hospital and found a peaceful, rural place to treat Shen Liufei.

The air was thick and warm. Dust danced like sharp pieces of metal as he breathed. Shen Liufei felt dazed as he stared at the ceiling that spun and reached a hand up to rub on his temples. He asked, "Was the surgery with that young man successful?"

Duan Licheng's smile froze momentarily. He asked, "What?"

"The young man who got into a car accident and suffered brain damage. Wasn't his name Bai Shuo?" Shen Liufei lowered his head and looked at those strange hands as he mumbled to himself, "I'm sorry for suddenly taking your body like this."

Duan Licheng pondered a bit and asked, "Do you remember what today's date is?"

Shen Liufei responded after some thought. He gave a date that was over a year ago from today.

No one knew what the side effects of the very first brain transplant surgery would be or what situations would trigger an unexpected reaction. After that deadly car accident in Thailand, Shen Liufei's memories returned to the time he had just completed his surgery, forgetting everything he had been through in Hanhai with Xie Lanshan.

Duan Licheng was stunned but quickly held it back in and said with a smile, "Yes, it looks like the surgery was a success. You seem to have successfully retained your old memories."

He wanted to keep Shen Liufei in hiding, even if it meant imprisoning the artist for the rest of his life. He didn't want this young man to risk his life anymore.

This location was quiet, like paradise. Outside the French window was a field of grass with flowers that looked as if they extended to the horizon. Shen Liufei stood topless in front of the mirror and turned his head occasionally when the floral scent made its way into the room. He could also see small animals gleefully chasing each other out in the grass field.

This young man called Bai Shuo was much taller than him and had a strong, muscular body with smooth skin and powerful muscles. He was said to be a fan of extreme sports and was particularly good at martial arts and car racing. It was precisely this dangerous interest that caused him to fall into a vegetative state during an accident. The young man's only family were second cousins who weren't willing to pay for his medical bills, so they accepted Duan Licheng's offer and donated the young man's body to him.

Duan Licheng looked at this new Shen Liufei with immense kindness in his eyes. He walked over and took out a photo he carried with him in his pocket, then said to the man in the mirror with a smile, "Here, have one last look at your old photo so you don't forget how you looked before."

Shen Liufei took the photo and glanced over it. There were two men in the photo, one standing and one sitting. The standing man was Duan Licheng, who was

handsome and tall as usual, while the man sitting in the wheelchair was distinctively thinner. His facial features weren't particularly pretty, but there was an air of refinement and elegance to him. His melancholic gaze was almost sympathetic to look at; even the clean white shirt on him seemed to add to this unique attractiveness.

The Shen Liufei in this photo was plagued with a severe illness that slowly paralyzed his body. The young man might have been introverted, but he was optimistic and always kept a faint smile on his face. He refused to meet with anyone in person and only communicated through email or letters. Because of his condition, he often spent his free time reading books or drawing. If he didn't intend to investigate the truth behind his family's massacre and mother's disappearance, he would never have accepted Duan Licheng's offer to participate in this ethically controversial surgery.

After a near-death experience, Shen Liufei could feel that his memories were still foggy. Vague images of people floated before his eyes, but he couldn't see the faces clearly, as if he was stuck behind a curtain. He felt as if he had dreamed of something that didn't belong to him, but he recalled some memories that were sealed deep in his past.

His head hurt. His whole body hurt. Chaotic imagery churned in his mind. These thoughts quickly exhausted Shen Liufei, and he lay back on the bed with Duan Licheng's help.

Shen Liufei placed a hand on the doctor's face and said, almost sentimentally, "It seems like I'm always giving you trouble."

Duan Licheng chuckled and touched the hand on his face. "You know that I will always be there when you need me the most."

Duan Licheng's deep voice was calming, like a lullaby. Shen Liufei closed his eyes briefly, then opened them up again and stared back to say, "That's strange, I suddenly remembered something."

Duan Licheng asked, "What is it?"

"I remember I was woken up by a strange sound when I was very little. I walked down the stairs to see my mother being locked inside the kitchen. She was like cattle waiting to be butchered. There were even shackles on her legs... then I heard my father ask her, 'You still want to leave while you're pregnant? If you try to leave again, I'll kill your son...' I wanted to listen in more, but that's when my grandmother suddenly appeared behind me. She covered my eyes and then whispered into my ear, 'You're just dreaming, this is a dream...'"

Aside from the wicked father and strange grandmother, his uncle—a thug who loved stealing women's underwear—would visit their house every so often. The man would always stare at his mother like a stray dog drooling at a fine meal of fresh blood.

These scenes were too difficult to comprehend at his young age, to the point he instinctively hid them in the depths of his memories. If he wasn't on the brink of

death, perhaps he would never have remembered any of this.

“I’ve always had a feeling since I was little that she was unhappy and would leave one day... so I have a guess right now that perhaps my parents were not married out of love. She was constantly being abused and insulted.” Shen Liufei closed his eyes as his fingers unnaturally rubbed his left wrist. There was nothing there, but he had a strange feeling that something very important used to be there before he lost it.

Fatigue overtook him, but before he fell asleep again, he suddenly remembered something else. The two things he remembered seemed to be connected, but he wasn’t sure.

His father always used “family connections” to punish his disobedient wife, using violence and abuse to force her into submission. He had once been hung on a tree outside their yard and whipped by his father. He cried out loud for help until he fell unconscious, but no one came to help him. In a daze, the rope that tied him up suddenly broke and he fell to the ground like a sandbag. By the time he woke up, he discovered that the rope had been sliced by a knife, but no one was around him.

Someone was helping him in the shadows. Shen Liufei told his grandmother about this, but the woman only laughed and said it was most likely a thief who wanted to steal something.

Only he knew that wasn’t true. He had never actually met the person, but he’d seen their eyes before.

The person was around the same age as him and would often look at him through the metal gate, exposing only half of his pretty eyes, which were a rare light brown that wasn’t common among Chinese people. Perhaps the child was of mixed ethnicity.

As soon as their eyes met, the person behind the door vanished. Those eyes only appeared that one hot summer night—a night that was like the countless nights during the season; the cherry apples were in full bloom in the yard. The red flowers became more vibrant while the pink shimmered brighter in this quiet time.

The little tricks Xie Lanshan learned from Han Guangming finally came in handy. After disguising himself, he went to pay his mother a visit at the hospital.

He braided his hair, stuck a fake mustache on his face, and put a pair of sunglasses on. He turned on his phone again as soon as he was finished and studied the photo on the arrest warrant. This quiet but strict cop looked nothing like his disguise as a smooth womanizer. Xie Lanshan turned off his screen and smiled mockingly as he thought, *The smallest change is often the biggest difference. We’re completely different people, and these fools only just realized it.*

He was now a wanted criminal, but his demeanor was still elegant and flashy, as if he wasn’t being chased down by the authorities right now. However, perhaps it was precisely this confidence and boldness that shielded him from suspicion.

Xie Lanshan called the psych department just before arriving and managed to get the newly admitted patients’ room numbers through his frivolous lies.

After checking there was nothing strange outside the hospital room and that Song Qilian was the only one inside, Xie Lanshan walked in without hesitation.

“A-Lan—” Song Qilian noticed someone walk in, but before she could call out, a swift hit from behind knocked her out.

Xie Lanshan carried Song Qilian to the bed and then walked toward the window. Gao Zhuyin’s wheelchair was beside it. She sat alone under the sunlight, her expression calm and her gaze fixed outside. She didn’t seem to notice the commotion inside the room.

He walked toward his mother and got down on one knee before her.

Gao Zhuyin finally turned around and glanced down at her son.

He was walking in the fire, struggling in purgatory. He fought with everyone, including himself, along the way. He had always thought he was strong enough to withstand anything through these trials, but he didn’t expect that he was still weak against this gentle gaze. Xie Lanshan’s eyes reddened as he buried his face in his mother’s lap. Like a lost child who finally found a home, he gently whispered with sincerity, “Mom.”

Gao Zhuyin also seemed to be moved by this voice, immense kindness and love effused from her gaze as she reached and touched her son’s face. Suddenly, her eyes widened as she pressed her hands on Xie Lanshan’s shoulders and cried, “Officer Tao, get this bad guy! Come arrest this bad guy who’s pretending to be my son!”

Calls of “Come get him!” pierced through Xie Lanshan’s ears and pained him. He quickly struggled out of his mother’s grip and attempted to escape the room.

But it was too late. The Blue Fox members who were quietly waiting outside broke into the room and blocked the exit. Xie Lanshan reacted quickly and leapt right out the window. Seven stories wasn’t too high for him. He climbed on the AC vents outside and jumped down, quickly making his way to the ground.

This body was extremely well trained to handle sports, which was almost like a gift from the heavens. Xie Lanshan turned around and looked up at the two Blue Fox members who stuck their heads out from the window. He waved two fingers around his forehead and gave a mocking salute back at them. His lips lifted and he said to himself, “Thanks, Officer Xie.”

Aside from the Blue Fox, several people from the municipal bureau’s violent crimes unit also hid around the hospital. Xie Lanshan took down three police officers in a row, which also hindered his progress a little. He darted to the streets, but Tao Longyue was already behind him. The captain held up a gun and called out, “A-Lan, come back!”

There were no children he could use as a shield this time, so Xie Lanshan had no choice but to stop. He was prepared and wasn’t as shocked and hurt this time seeing his brother hold up a gun at him. Xie Lanshan turned around slowly and said with a smile, “You’re the boss with a gun here. I’ll do as you say.”

“I don’t want to point my gun at you. I just want to talk,” Tao Longyue said earnestly. “A-Lan, we were wrong about you. Please come back.”

This comment about being wronged was even more painful than being suspected of being a criminal. There was nothing reassuring about this. Xie Lanshan almost laughed. He lifted an eyebrow and studied Tao Longyue as if he was looking at a complete stranger, seemingly unamused.

Tao Longyue continued, “We received the latest update from Thailand. You’re no longer a suspect in this case. The Blue Foxes were all stationed in the municipal bureau; one of their members was captured. You know, that really optimistic one who was also very kind to you, Ling Yun. They all want you to go back right now so that you can help bring Ling Yun back—”

“Hold up, Captain Tao, hold up. A Blue Fox member was kidnapped. What does that have to do with me?” As if he was uninvolved with anything mentioned, Xie Lanshan interrupted Tao Longyue and shrugged mockingly. He lifted the corner of his lips and said, “I’m Ye Shen, not Xie Lanshan. Besides, Xie Lanshan isn’t even part of the Blue Fox anymore. You guys were so quick to abandon him and now you’re coming back to ask him to save someone from your team? Don’t you think this is a bit funny?”

“This... is something that we received from Thailand two days ago.” Tao Longyue knew he was in the wrong and put his gun down after some thought. He pulled out the necklace with a bullet from his pocket and held it up before Xie Lanshan to return the item and said, “I’m assuming this is what you gave Shen Liufei.”

The blood on the bullet was dry. This used to be a memento from his father that he later gave to Shen Liufei. It also contained his heart.

Xie Lanshan’s eyes narrowed as he looked at the necklace; something had happened to Shen Liufei.

“You know that there’s merit commutation for a sentence. Even if... Even if you’re Ye Shen, you can...” Tao Longyue couldn’t continue. Even he knew that this negotiation wasn’t persuasive.

“Oh, really?” Xie Lanshan finally seemed to show some interest and retracted his stony gaze. He glanced slightly around and then curled up a finger to gesture Tao Longyue to walk toward him and said, “Come here and explain it clearly to me, just what exactly is going on.”

“Mu Kun kidnapped Ling Yun, who was tortured. The drug lord hacked into the municipal bureau’s internal network and sent a live stream of the torture. He said that if you don’t go find him within three days, he’ll slice Ling Yun’s throat and kill him...”

Tao Longyue explained as he walked toward Xie Lanshan. He let his guard down, only to be met with a sudden attack as Xie Lanshan shoved him away.

Just as that happened, a truck drove down the street. If Tao Longyue didn’t react fast enough and hadn’t rolled to dodge the vehicle, it would have crushed him at that

instant.

By the time he sat back up from shock on the ground, covered in mud, Xie Lanshan had vanished again. He noticed that not only had the man disappeared but the necklace and his gun had as well.

(vi)

Xie Lanshan escaped, but Ling Yun still needed to be rescued. Time passed brutally quick; there was only a day and a half left until the countdown ended. Ling Yun was on his last breath and couldn't even speak, but thankfully Mu Kun never once appeared on the screen again, nor did he send others to continue the torture.

But the watchers were still around. There was nothing in the storage unit aside from Mu Kun's subordinates. They were all armed with deadly weapons and spent all day and night in the storage unit, eating and drinking inside.

After the technicians cleaned up the background noise from the video, they noticed that they would often hear the sounds of ferry whistles from the outside over the last two days.

Sui Hong said, "Ferries have different whistling sounds, each with unique meanings. We've heard the ferries send the same long whistle for two days in a row, which means that the ship is ready to take off from the port or arrive at the dock."

Tu Lang nodded in agreement and said, "There's only a handful of ports here. There's no way they will all have ships leave the dock at the same time. We'll investigate right now and see if we can figure out where the storage unit might be."

Chi Jin stood on the side without a word, then turned his attention to the screen and said, "Something dropped."

A piece of paper dropped beside a drug dealer's foot on the screen. Even though he quickly picked it up, the technicians were still able to capture that brief moment and discovered it was a convenience store receipt.

While they couldn't see the address on it, being able to locate a berth made up for the lack of information. Tu Lang said gleefully, "We can narrow in on the storage unit where Ling Yun is locked!"

Chi Jin let out a small sigh, then felt Sui Hong tap on his shoulder. The man said, "Follow me."

Sui Hong walked silently in front, coughing every so often while Chi Jin followed with his head down like a shy new recruit. The spirit of the entire team was down, so the captain took him to the municipal bureau's training room.

Chi Jin saw Sui Hong walk toward a bench press and hold up a barbell, which he studied. Assuming the captain was about to get on the bench himself, Chi Jin quickly called out, "Captain, you're not well enough..."

It wasn't a secret in the provincial branch that Captain Sui Hong was not as fit as before, which was why he had slowly moved to work in the background these last two

years and no longer led the team on the front lines. Luckily, Sui Hong had no plans to act rashly. Instead, he gave Chi Jin a faint smile. "I haven't seen you train with this in a while. Try it out."

The rare personal time with his captain lifted Chi Jin's mood considerably as he obediently lay on the bench. He reached his hands up to hold the bar above him and laughed. "Eighty to ninety kilos is still a piece of cake."

After completing a set, Sui Hong began adding on weight, quickly reaching Chi Jin's normal limits.

"Hey, Cap," Chi Jin begged. "Can you slow down a bit?"

"Don't stop," Sui Hong said as he added another weight. "Remember our motto?"

Chi Jin bit down on his teeth and answered as he pressed, "Of course."

Sui Hong added one more piece, which was completely over Chi Jin's personal limit, and breathed, "Recite it."

Chi Jin could feel his muscles pull to the point of discomfort as he said through his reddened face, "Fear no enemies, leave none behind."

Sui Hong added another weight to the other side of the bar and, while frowning, said, "Louder."

Chi Jin could feel this immense pressure weigh down on his muscles as he howled out in pain, "Fear no enemies! Leave none behind!"

Just before he would let out a breath, he felt his hand slip while the bar was right above his head.

He was still lying on the bench, unable to dodge in time. If he were hit, his rib cage would shatter in an instant.

Chi Jin's eyes widened in panic; his hands were still on the bar but he could no longer muster enough energy to press up. He watched as the bar dropped toward him, but just at that moment, the man beside him reached over.

Sui Hong grabbed tightly onto the bar with great force, the veins on his forehead popping. In a far cry from his normal placid demeanor, the captain mustered up all of his energy to hold up the bar for his subordinate.

Chi Jin caught a breath and pressed up, helping the bar back to its default position. He sat up from the bench and panted heavily, "Cap'n... that's why I said to slow down ___"

A hand pressed the back of his neck before he could finish. Chi Jin instinctively struggled and couldn't even lift his head. Sui Hong held him there with substantial force.

Then, he heard his captain say one line. This one sentence contained a weight so heavy that the barbells couldn't compare and struck even more harshly into Chi Jin's heart.

He said, "You're dismissed from participating in this rescue mission."

Sui Hong left the training room, and Chi Jin sat frozen on the bench. There was some new equipment in the bureau, so the fresh smell of leather filled the room, but

right now it was nothing but the rotten smell of corpses to him.

Emotions poured down like a waterfall inside him as he felt agonized. He knew he was already being suspected. His captain didn't expose him, perhaps out of lack of proof, perhaps because he didn't want to make the same mistake he had with Xie Lanshan. Or perhaps it was out of sympathy for their decade-long friendship.

He still kept in contact with Tang Qinglan, but it wasn't for the red ice; it was to beg the woman to show Ling Yun some mercy. Of course, his definition of showing mercy was to give Ling Yun a swift and painless death. He couldn't bear to see his comrade suffer through this endless torture.

Mu Kun seemed to have taken his words into account and stopped the abuse on Ling Yun, but Tang Qinglan said the drug lord needed him to do another favor. The last dregs of Guan Nuoqin's forces hadn't been cleaned up, and the Golden Triangle was still not fully stabilized. The drug lord wanted to exchange some goods with a Brazilian arms merchant for massive amounts of weapons to wipe out Guan Nuoqin's subordinates. Because of the strong antidrug efforts in China right now, this was a job only a Blue Fox member could help accomplish.

Chi Jin didn't say yes, but he didn't reject the offer either. In fact, he had no idea where he should go from there. He sat quietly in the training room reminiscing about the past, but didn't dare to think about the future.

Ever since the moment he touched red ice, he had set foot into a massive web of conspiracy that only led him down one wrong step after another. By the time he turned his head around, mountains of trials and danger already blocked all paths. He was both regretful and angry.

After returning to the temporary hideout Zang Yifeng had prepared, Xie Lanshan logged into the municipal bureau's internal network using a VPN. Right after he entered the password, he also saw the live stream video of Ling Yun being tortured. That once handsome and bright young man had vanished in the video as he hung his head down almost lifelessly. His hands were tied, his mouth stuffed with dirty cloth, his whole body covered in bloodstains.

Xie Lanshan could feel his head throb in pain. He remembered the time this young man took him back on a helicopter, how he had smiled and said, "*The captain asked me to take you home.*"

Zang Yifeng stood behind Xie Lanshan as he slurped on some freshly cooked instant noodles. He peeked at the screen from behind and almost choked in shock. He coughed a bit and then said through a mouthful of food, "Ouch, man, that's some horrific torture!"

Xie Lanshan moved the laptop to the side and hinted that the man shouldn't be looking at this.

Zang Yifeng took a few courteous steps back but still asked, "What are you watching that for? Didn't you say it had nothing to do with you?"

“Eat your food.” Xie Lanshan scolded him coldly, his eyes still fixed on Ling Yun on the screen.

After staring for another ten minutes, Xie Lanshan slammed the laptop shut, walked toward the bed, and fell onto the mattress.

He closed his eyes and tried to convince himself, *Ye Shen, this has nothing to do with you.*

The nap didn’t even last twenty minutes, and he sat back up once again. He walked over to the desk and opened up the laptop. Xie Lanshan’s analysis followed the same method as the technicians in the bureau, and despite spending a little more time than necessary, he also found out where Ling Yun could possibly be held.

While he couldn’t pinpoint the exact unit, having a general direction was good enough. Xie Lanshan had confidence in the abilities of the Blue Fox, but he couldn’t shake off a bad feeling.

From his understanding of Mu Kun, it was suspicious for any investigation to go so smoothly.

Yet time waited for nobody; even if Ling Yun wasn’t killed, the young man might die of blood loss at any moment. Xie Lanshan lay down on the bed, frustrated. He put a mint-flavored cigarette in his mouth but didn’t light it up. He ground the tobacco between his teeth, fingers rubbing on the case.

The room was too small, and the luring smell of instant noodles quickly filled the space. Zang Yifeng spoke as he ate and drank the broth. “I’m sure you’re just determined to act like a villain, but you really want to save your teammate deep down.”

Xie Lanshan grabbed a pillow on the bed and threw it at the man. He turned and feigned sleep, but his heart was anything but calm. An eerie sense of concern seemed to grapple with his heart—what was the source of his unease?

He once again opened his eyes after some unrest and rushed toward the desk.

Zang Yifeng was already done eating and stared strangely at Xie Lanshan.

In order to monitor Ling Yun, Mu Kun’s subordinates had lived two whole days inside this storage unit and would only occasionally come in and out of it. Xie Lanshan replayed the whole video from start to finish and took in all the details. Finally, he noticed that someone arrived in the unit this morning with slightly damp trousers and mud beneath their shoes. They left small visible stains on the flooring.

Xie Lanshan felt himself break into cold sweat and checked the weather immediately. He then noticed that there was no rain at the port this morning.

That’s when he discovered the seventy-two-hour countdown was a dangerous and crafty trap. Mu Kun set up two identical storage units; one was where Ling Yun was locked; the sounds of the ferry whistle and dropped receipt were all fake. This live stream was bait to lure everyone in.

The storage unit by the port was perhaps the most dangerous trap of them all, waiting patiently to serve out revenge.

The oblivious Blue Fox members formed a ten-man team destined for the port to accomplish the rescue mission. They were quickly able to locate the unit Ling Yun was locked in. Tu Lang held his phone and studied the live stream carefully; he saw a masked man holding a gun enter a storage unit, and the same thing showed up in the live stream as well.

He didn't think this was an act that Mu Kun had set up, a massive trap waiting for them to enter. Tu Lang turned around and held up his thumb to his teammates, indicating that they had found the right place.

They quickly analyzed the firepower these guards carried, and after confirming they could take the people down, they acted immediately. Tu Lang's sharpshooting quickly took down the snipers hiding on the roof of the storage unit. The drug dealers had no chance to fight back and dropped to the ground one by one.

Three members barged into the storage for rescue, the others surrounded the unit under Tu Lang's orders to prevent the enemies from gathering for a counterattack.

They saw Ling Yun on the chair as they entered the unit, facing away from them. Tu Lang put his gun away and rushed forward, calling out, "Ling Yun, we're here. Just hold on a little longer!"

Yet he was shocked to find that it wasn't Ling Yun sitting in the chair. It was a plastic mannequin.

Soon, the entire Blue Fox team recognized that this wasn't the same storage unit as the one in the live stream. There was nothing inside the storage on the video, but this place had a handful of large blue paint cans in the corner.

At the same time, the municipal bureau received an anonymous call. A Blue Fox member said to Sui Hong after hanging up, "Captain, this anonymous call told us to retreat immediately and said it's Mu Kun's trap. The voice sounded like Xie Lanshan —"

But it was too late. A shadow appeared at the entrance of the storage room that was on the live stream. A man walked toward the camera.

The lackeys who fell to the hands of the Blue Fox were pawns he was willing to sacrifice. Even they were in the dark about the true face of this conspiracy. Mu Kun faced the camera and waved at Sui Hong through the screen, then said with a devilish smile, "I win, Captain Sui."

Sui Hong realized his teammates had fallen into a trap and called out to Tu Lang, his voice trembling as he howled, "Retreat, quick—!"

There were thousands of kilograms of explosives inside those paint cans.

The massive explosion shook the heavens, consuming everything within an instant and taking the lives of all the Blue Fox members who went on the rescue mission.

Xie Lanshan had a stressful night of little rest. He couldn't sit still and got up before the sun came up.

He turned on the TV and saw the news reporting the event that had occurred earlier this morning. The camera didn't pan to the bloody scene and only showed the rescue team helping injured civilians around the area. The image of corpses being carried out only flashed by briefly, but Xie Lanshan still saw it. As a bloodstained corpse with broken limbs lay beneath the broken metal pipes and cement, a hand stuck out from the ruins and a spirited image of a fox appeared on the blackened sleeves.

The rescue efforts were in vain. Corpses were carried out one by one from beneath the collapsed unit. Mu Kun installed enough explosives to take the lives of every single Blue Fox member who entered.

Xie Lanshan glued his eyes to the screen and felt chills and disgust. This uncomfortable feeling crawled into his bones, freezing his limbs and his warm blood. He took a backpack to organize his things, packed a knife, and then hid the gun he'd stolen from Tao Longyue on his waist.

Zang Yifeng was sleeping on the sofa; he turned and saw the gun through his half-awake eyes and jolted awake.

Having heard the news and pieced together what happened to the runaway, he shook his head and said sympathetically, "What a shame..."

He noticed Xie Lanshan was finished packing and ready to leave, then asked in shock, "You're going out this early?"

"I'm going to visit a-Xia. If she hung around Miss T for a while, it won't be hard to get some intel out of her when she's lucid."

"Want me to go with you?"

"No."

"Are you looking for that drug lord?"

"My partner may have fallen into his hands. I need to go find him." The rejection from his dark pupils was visible as he warned, "Don't get yourself into things you shouldn't be involved with."

"That goes to—" Zang Yifeng stopped himself as he noticed the malice on the young man's face. He was a thug who had spent his life around dangerous people and knew when to keep his mouth shut. He then explained, "I got you some antibiotics last night; they're on the stove. You can't go to the hospital right now for your injuries. At least take care of yourself first."

Xie Lanshan was about to leave when he stopped and turned to look at the man on the sofa. He tried to look friendlier and said, "Thank you for your care these last few days. I'll pay the money back."

Zang Yifeng finally realized after sharing the same space these past few days that this young man was indeed full of contradictions. He would sometimes be the epitome of evil, but other times the most benevolent saint. It was almost as if he was constantly being pulled between one extreme and another; it was tiring to watch even

as a bystander. Xie Lanshan opened the door as a refreshing gust of wind blew by. Zang Yifeng nearly jumped at this cold air and finally asked, "If you're just gonna get revenge for your teammates, there really isn't a need to risk your life. Don't you think they deserved it for how they treated you?"

This question stunned Xie Lanshan for a few moments. He then walked back into the kitchen, took the medicine, and left.

Conflicted, Zang Yifeng watched the man leave. After the figure had long disappeared, he suddenly punched the bed frame and let out a deep sigh.

After receiving the information he wanted from a-Xia, Xie Lanshan took a bus and left Hanhai toward the city where the explosion occurred. The place was very close to the border of China and Myanmar. Based on his knowledge of Mu Kun, the perverse man loved watching his prey struggle, so he had to be hiding somewhere within the same city. The man was likely in the dark, grinding his teeth and drinking the blood of his enemies as he pleased himself with the victory of his revenge.

Xie Lanshan had already guessed that Shen Liufei was likely not in the hands of the drug lord, otherwise, he would have already appeared on the screen as bait to lure Xie Lanshan, but he needed to put an end to everything between himself and Mu Kun, and death was the only ending to this story.

The ancient city was a river away from Myanmar, but the streets were clean and peaceful. Small restaurants and shops lined the streets; colorful signs painted the scenery.

Like a magnet attracted to an opposite pole, Xie Lanshan showed up in the most rundown bar in the city as soon as night fell. He was an undercover officer once and knew all the hidden signs and codes used by drug dealers, so he was quickly able to determine who had the goods.

Xie Lanshan walked into another joint and purposely took the center seat in front of the bar. He placed his heavy backpack down, which almost shook the ground of the establishment.

The owner behind the bar reached out a hand, attempting to help put the customer's personal items into storage. Yet before he could even touch the bag, Xie Lanshan interrupted coldly and warned him, "Hands off."

The owner chuckled and gestured that he had no ill intent and even tried to strike up a conversation with him.

"You're new here, aren't you? I've never seen you before."

"Yeah."

"A local? You don't look like one."

"I'm not."

"Just came?"

"Just came."

"From where?"

"Somewhere up north."

“Which city? Your Mandarin is too good, I don’t have a clue.”

“Hanhai.”

Every response was short and succinct, and also cold and expressionless. Even if the owner prided himself in being a social man, he could not pry out more information.

But everyone was looking at him. He was a handsome man who could earn himself the envious looks of the same sex and lustful gazes of the opposite sex. With his open and flashy demeanor, it was natural that all eyes in the bar fell on him. Xie Lanshan was satisfied with these stares; they would let Mu Kun know that he was here.

Combining the information he received from a-Xia, Xie Lanshan found out the source of the red ice from a local drug dealer and deduced Mu Kun’s hideout.

He acted that night to search the area and surprisingly discovered Ling Yun.

Inside a small wooden hut that reeked of mold, Ling Yun was still wearing the same bloodstained shirt. A black bag covered his face as his head hung to one side. The light inside the house was dim, but it was enough to make out the injuries from the torture on his body. He saw whipping scars, bloody knife wounds, and countless areas where flesh and blood mingled until white bones were visible beneath.

Xie Lanshan had seen Ling Yun on the stream; the young man had indeed gone through an agonizing time.

After carefully studying the surroundings, he confirmed Mu Kun and his main guards weren’t around. Xie Lanshan held up the gun in hand and knocked out the guard outside the house. He snuck inside and walked toward Ling Yun.

“Ling Yun?” Xie Lanshan called out gently. He saw Ling Yun stir, then quickly whispered, “I’m here to bring you home.”

He reached a hand forward to take down the mask, but Ling Yun suddenly woke up and headbutted him right in the forehead.

Xie Lanshan fell back at this sudden impact that also triggered his low fever and the infected wound on his shoulder. He attempted to crawl back up but moving only increased the pain in his shoulder and head. During this moment of hesitation, Ling Yun stood up and pointed a gun at him.

“A-Lan, I know you too well. You take the whole ‘leave none behind’ part more seriously than anyone else.”

The person took off his mask—Xie Lanshan didn’t expect that this beaten-up “Ling Yun” was actually Mu Kun himself.

All the injuries were real. In order to lure Xie Lanshan in, Mu Kun had inflicted those wounds on himself.

He had already received intel by the time Xie Lanshan stepped into the second bar that night.

That was why he was happy to give out so many clues. He knew that Xie Lanshan would knock on his door eventually. He already got his revenge on the Blue Fox, but why hadn’t he kept Ling Yun in that storage room filled with explosives? He had been

waiting for the ashes to disappear, all in order to lure Xie Lanshan. Mu Kun had been waiting for this for so long.

A figure that was hiding outside the door appeared and knocked Xie Lanshan out from behind with a heavy blow to the head.

The figure was Mu Kun's subordinate, who turned to his boss. "Job's done."

To his surprise, Mu Kun gave him a heavy slap on the face and scolded the lackey menacingly, "I didn't tell you to hit so hard."

(viii)

In order to treat Shen Liufei properly, Duan Licheng took him to a quiet and rural place that was far away from the rest of the world. There was no internet inside this massive mansion, but Shen Liufei seemed to not mind. He temporarily kept his mind out of worldly matters and focused on his rehab.

He assumed the handful of physical injuries all over his body were from Bai Shuo's car accident, and his head would spin and throb in pain every once in a while. If he wasn't attempting to search for the truth of his family's massacre, he would never have risked crossing moral and legal boundaries to take part in this surgery. Of course, boredom was part of human nature. Rehab was one thing; he still asked Duan Licheng to bring in his old notebook to pass time.

There was a folder inside the laptop that contained a massive database of files regarding crimes against women. Duan Licheng was out for business today, so Shen Liufei sat by the desk and carefully read through the files while he subconsciously rubbed his wrist. He had been repeating this motion for the last few days and felt as if something was missing. Perhaps a watch or bracelet? He looked down and stared for a moment, but nothing came to mind.

There was a cup of coffee, a desktop calendar, and a newly published weekly life magazine on the side of the table. The desk faced the window, which exposed the bright sunlight that shone above the gardens outside. A reddish and green bird flew by like it was painting the world with its vibrant colors; the scene was almost ethereal, like an oil painting.

He shifted his gaze back to the screen. In this case numbered 002, the victim's name was Zhuo Tian, who was the second woman killed by Ye Shen after Shen Liufei's mother. Her body was also never found.

It wasn't easy to gather all of this data. Most came from him leveraging personal connections across different channels. Even the public security department might not have information as detailed as these files. Shen Liufei read Zhuo Tian's profile thoroughly and discovered that this young woman had a boyfriend. The man was a drug addict who had a string of misdemeanors on his record. Just before Zhuo Tian was murdered, the man had also been arrested for hiding narcotics and served two and a half years.

He quietly noted the man's name: Zang Yifeng.

There was no other additional information from this name, but he felt fatigued and the headache grew the more he pondered. Shen Liufei turned off his laptop and took a quick break. He held up a hand to check the magazine; the cover story was bland. He had no interest in celebrity columns, and only the news of an animated movie called *Land of Aeolus* airing caught his attention briefly, though that quickly got boring as well.

He placed the magazine back onto the table and flipped through the calendar. He soon noticed that the calendar for the next month had been ripped out. Who would rip out the pages for months into the future? He couldn't comprehend it.

He studied it further and noticed the calendar rack was a little old, as if it had been taken out of storage. Shen Liufei grew suspicious and his fingers once again rubbed his left wrist.

Suddenly, the face of a man flashed across his eyes. In the fleeting image, he saw the person smile at him. The curl of the man's lips lifted at a beautiful angle, those eyes filled with immense adoration and love, like a warm light within the darkness.

Shen Liufei recognized it was Ye Shen's face. It was supposed to be a face he despised from the depths of his heart, but he didn't feel any hatred—instead, he could feel his heartbeat increase like a bullet ready to shoot from a gun.

Shen Liufei grew more puzzled as he looked out the window; a girl on a bicycle rode by the stone pavement beside the mansion. A rain shower had just passed by earlier this morning, so the paved road was still slippery. The girl's bike wobbled as it snaked on the road, looking as if it was ready to fall at any moment.

Shen Liufei jumped from the window toward the girl and caught her handlebars just before she fell to the ground. His brain might have been implanted into a new body, but Bai Shuo's muscle memory remained, which meant that he inherited the young man's athletic reflexes and physical traits.

The girl gave him a bright smile as she thanked him.

There was a movie ticket that poked out of her purse pocket. Shen Liufei lowered his gaze and asked gently, "Is that for a movie in the city? The *Land of Aeolus*?"

The girl's eyes widened as she said, "That's a movie from last year. I'm watching something else."

Shen Liufei frowned and asked, "What's today's date?"

The girl responded without hesitation.

This unexpected answer stunned Shen Liufei.

The girl tried calling out to him a few times but didn't receive a response, so she got back on her bicycle and left to watch her movie.

Familiar scenes poured out like a waterfall in his mind; Ye Shen's handsome face once again reappeared before his eyes and jabbed him in the heart. He saw the man kneel before him, take the necklace around his neck off and wrap it around his wrist.

He saw the man kiss his hand and heard him say gently:

Remember that I love you.

Remember to always remember this.

Duan Licheng returned less than an hour later, but he was too late. Shen Liufei had already left.

The sunset's glow embellished the garden outside the window while the curtains danced in the breeze. He sat in the empty room and shook his head as he laughed bitterly.

He couldn't help but admit that those two were bound by fate. No matter what one of them turned into, the other would instinctively follow as if their destinies were tied.

The Blunder of Night

Xie Lanshan slept for three days, so Mu Kun watched over him by his bedside the entire time.

He ordered his men to clean up the young cop, change his clothes, and even get a doctor to treat the wounds on his body. The lightly treated shoulder injury was already infected, so they needed to cut it back open and disinfect the wound. His pinkie finger was also broken; they treated that as well. Mu Kun's heart ached at these injuries, but his anger was stronger. He felt as if an outsider had trampled on his pure and holy land. Mu Kun had never thought his plan to set the cops against each other was that brilliant, but the rough plan had successfully turned his a-Lan into a wanted criminal. This pushed Xie Lanshan down a dead end and meant he had a price to pay in his own blood.

The weather had been fine in this small town near the border of China and Myanmar. Fresh flowers bloomed everywhere as their scent filled the air. The room was decorated so warmly and elegantly that it was impossible to imagine it was the hideout of an evil drug lord. Mu Kun sat beside Xie Lanshan's bedside and sniffed the smell around the room. The more he took in Xie Lanshan's scent, the stronger he felt that it was more alluring than the most tempting desires in the mortal world.

Xie Lanshan was exhausted. He felt as if he had walked too far for too long and had finally found a place to rest. He quietly sank into the soft mattress, breathing evenly while his eyes remained closed.

Another pair of eyes were locked on Xie Lanshan's face. Mu Kun sat quietly by the bed for a long while; like a bee unable to withstand the tempting scent, he reached out a hand and gently brushed it across the young cop's forehead. Almost as soon as his fingers pressed down, Mu Kun felt the heat from Xie Lanshan's skin. He immediately called the doctor over and questioned why Xie Lanshan still had a fever.

The doctor injected another dose of antibiotics into the IV for Xie Lanshan, but was then shooed out of the room by an angered Mu Kun. He turned back slightly by the door and was shocked to discover that the fearsome and evil drug lord who held no regard for human life was staring at his sickly love with immense adoration in his eyes—it was almost horrifyingly romantic.

“Get lost already,” Mu Kun scolded the doctor, who didn't dare upset the man anymore and ran out the door.

It was less obvious when Xie Lanshan still had short hair, but a careful eye could see this face was indeed ethereally handsome like a fairy that existed in storybooks.

He was nothing like any of those damned cops with guns. Mu Kun leaned in close toward Xie Lanshan and traced the man's face with his fingers. As if always yearning for more, his finger glossed past that fine skin and delicate features.

He finally leaned down and pressed a kiss on Xie Lanshan's eyelids, which seemed to move slightly beneath his lips at that moment.

"Shen... cuz..." Xie Lanshan finally woke from this commotion and pulled his eyelids open in a daze. As soon as he recognized the face in front of him as Mu Kun's, his expression dropped, and he struggled to get up.

But his limbs were completely still; he couldn't even move an inch. Xie Lanshan sat up briefly and then fell back onto the bed.

"I asked the doctor to add some sedatives in your IV so that you can rest up." Mu Kun smiled. He lifted Xie Lanshan's chin and said as he leaned in, "Don't waste your efforts, or you'll worry me."

Xie Lanshan let out a sigh and gave up the struggle. He asked coldly, "What do you want?"

Mu Kun stared at him and said, "That should be my question. What do you want?"

Xie Lanshan didn't know how to respond. He only stared at the man wordlessly.

"Your captain, comrades, and even those people that made sacrifices for you, nobody ever really trusted you." Mu Kun turned and asked him sternly, "Just what are you so stubbornly holding on to, Xie Lanshan? You've never given up on your career and comrades, but they didn't hesitate to abandon you. They would willingly let you die because of an unconfirmed suspicion, so why do you still care for them?"

Xie Lanshan still didn't respond, but his eyebrows pressed together slightly and the light in his eyes faded. Mu Kun didn't understand the story behind that surgery, but his words were still true. It was just as the drug lord said: his most trusted comrades had abandoned him.

"Come back to the Golden Triangle with me. I won't question your betrayal; we can forget about what happened and look only toward the future." Mu Kun grew more excited as he spoke. The unyielding king of the Golden Triangle gloated from conceit. He said, "You would be the queen... nobody will ever harm you anymore... we can make love every day on gold..."

Xie Lanshan let out a mocking and cold laugh as he listened to this drug lord talk like a perverted billionaire.

"Is this not an ideal life?" Mu Kun was kneeling by his bedside like a loyal follower of Buddha. He held Xie Lanshan's hand between his palms as he begged, his expression filled with adoration, "A-Lan, if you return to the Golden Triangle with me, I'll do anything you say."

"I want you dead," Xie Lanshan said flatly, unamused.

"Sure," Mu Kun responded without a hint of rage. His expression shifted as he smiled. "I'll die on your body."

A spark of inspiration appeared at that instant. He crawled onto the bed and took off his shirt, stripping off his black button-up. The man was fit and all the injuries on his body were self-inflicted. He was like a beast who wasn't afraid of murder.

"You..." Xie Lanshan was shocked to see that the man was serious. He tightened his muscles in anger and clenched his fist, hoping to wear off the effects of the sedatives and pain relievers.

But he still couldn't move.

Mu Kun tried to lean down and kiss him, but Xie Lanshan moved his head and refused to comply. Mu Kun laughed, then grabbed onto Xie Lanshan's chin and pressed their lips together.

Xie Lanshan could feel the man's invasive tongue in his mouth. Unable to resist otherwise, he suddenly bit down heavily.

At the end of a long and bloody kiss, Mu Kun lifted his face, unfazed. Instead, he licked the fresh blood that rolled down from the corner of his mouth and laughed.

Xie Lanshan knew he couldn't hide and begging for mercy wasn't his style. He said as calmly as he could, "I swear I will kill you, I swear."

"I've been waiting years for this day. Even death is a good price." Mu Kun only got more excited as he unzipped his pants and pressed his body down on Xie Lanshan. He leaned into the man's ear and whispered, "I'll make you feel better than that Shen artist ever could..."

He buried his face into Xie Lanshan's neck and bit on his throat like a thirsty dog, then extended the kiss down his collarbone and chest.

He held up one of Xie Lanshan's legs and attempted to take off the man's underwear, but the action stopped abruptly.

Mu Kun noticed that there was no birthmark on this man's tailbone.

Xie Lanshan wasn't someone who cared enough about appearance to remove this birthmark, and this was when he finally accepted the truth. The ridiculous rumor was true.

His a-Lan was already dead.

(ii)

Mu Kun was shaken by the truth displayed before him and sat up stiffly. His expression was that of disbelief as he fell off the bed, as if the whole world had broken down.

He was kneeling on the floor as he howled out in despair; he covered his face with his hands and cried in agony.

Xie Lanshan finally caught his breath. He felt no remorse for this man; from the moment he learned of the truth, everyone he had once known and cared for had turned their backs on him in fear. No one had even spared a moment to consider the cop who rested peacefully in a foreign land. But he had never imagined that the person who

was most affected by his death would be his mortal enemy. This bloodthirsty demon was now letting out agonized cries and grieving. It was so sincere that it almost seemed like he would shatter at a touch.

“Where is he buried... where...” Mu Kun finally stopped the horrific cries and repeated the same question, “Where’s my a-Lan buried?”

The question was strange; Xie Lanshan didn’t know whether to answer. After a moment’s hesitation, he said, “I don’t know.”

Mu Kun stood up, still shaking, after the disappointing response, he turned to look at Xie Lanshan.

Xie Lanshan could feel from a glance that the blow to this man had been heavy. He looked almost as if he had aged overnight. His usual handsome face scrunched up in a strange and twisted manner that was almost pitiful.

In striking contrast to his earlier adoring gaze for a lover, the man only shed a silent tear, then allowed the coldness and madness within him to seep from his gaze.

He looked like a monster or some creature of the dead—like anything but a human.

Xie Lanshan was covered in a cold sweat. He could feel some energy returning to him as he glanced around to find something to defend himself.

“I’m going to kill you... I’m going to kill you, you bastard. How dare you take his memories and live on with his identity...” Mu Kun walked toward Xie Lanshan, his bloodshot eyes fixed on the man. “You dirty mutt. You’d open your legs for anyone on command. I’m going to take you to his grave. I’ll shoot you dead in the head and return everything you stole from him so he can fully rest in peace under the earth...”

Rage and madness quickly filled the man. He started walking around in circles like a madman and began talking to himself, “But where is my a-Lan buried? I don’t know where he is...”

He didn’t think this nasty serial murderer deserved to use Xie Lanshan’s identity, but he also couldn’t let go of this body that looked almost identical to his love. Unable to find his love’s corpse, Mu Kun had a sudden idea. He couldn’t allow this man to live on but didn’t want to bury this body, so the best option was to keep him inside formalin solution.

There were still some empty rooms inside this house that contained massive glass containers used to make red ice. Mu Kun’s lackeys took Xie Lanshan over to a room and tossed him into one of the empty containers.

A diluted formaldehyde solution could be used to create the preservative formalin. Mu Kun ordered his men to find the organic compound, and they began pouring water into the container.

Xie Lanshan was quickly drenched in cold water inside the tank. He pressed a hand on the glass and stared coldly at the man outside.

Mu Kun was rejoicing madly at his ingenious idea. He danced as he waited for his subordinates to come in with the formaldehyde to complete this masterpiece.

Yet before they could return, Tang Qinglan entered the room. She announced gravely that Chi Jin betrayed them. The young officer used his own spies to intercept a huge portion of the goods they were planning to use to trade with the Brazilians; the arms merchants were extremely displeased and sent in their men to renegotiate.

Every step of his plan was perfect, but he could not have known this foolish kid would dare destroy his goods. Mu Kun had no choice but to follow Tang Qinglan out to deal with this troublesome matter.

The container wasn't completely filled with water by the time the subordinates returned, but the man inside seemed to have drowned already. He was floating inside the tank with his eyes closed.

They assumed he was already dead judging by the time and turned off the water. A subordinate pulled a small stool over to climb toward the opening of the container. He opened up the bottle that held the formaldehyde and prepared to pour it. A strong scent rushed toward his face as soon as he opened the bottle. He teared up as he cursed, "Fuck, shit stinks!"

Just as he was about to pour the solution into the container, the man inside suddenly opened his eyes. That habit of holding his breath underwater saved Xie Lanshan's life; he jumped up using the buoyancy from the water and grabbed the man's neck with one hand and the chemical bottle with another, then shoved the bottle into the man's face.

The bottle went inside his mouth and Xie Lanshan lifted the bottle up, pouring that acidic solution down the man's throat.

It didn't take long for the man to knock out. Xie Lanshan pushed him down to the ground and jumped out of the container.

He took a gun from the unconscious man's pocket and began his massacre.

They were still within China's borders and not in Mu Kun's territories. A group of people usually guarded the place, but most had followed Mu Kun to see the Brazilian merchants. The ones left in the house were virtually useless. Xie Lanshan shot down one man after another like a demon from hell, stealing new guns when one ran out of ammo. He saw a servant beg for her life on her knees, but he didn't even bother to think about if she was innocent while he killed everyone else. Then, holding up his hand, he pulled the trigger, piercing right through her skull.

He didn't find Shen Liufei or Ling Yun. Xie Lanshan finally escaped the house, disheveled and alone.

Mu Kun's house was in a rather rural place, so he trudged down a trail like a walking corpse. He walked from day to sundown. He wasn't sure how long he walked, but he finally saw the scene before him change and noticed he'd made his way to a populated area.

There were young couples on the streets, their eyes filled with love and adoration. A sweet atmosphere filled the air of this strange street. Xie Lanshan looked up in a daze and then realized today was February 14th, Valentine's Day.

The adrenaline from the murders vanished under this romantic and festive atmosphere. Xie Lanshan trudged forward, his footsteps hesitant. His clothes were still wet, the foul smell of the acidic chemical still lingered. His wounds stung again after his heavy exercise and the pain reached into his heart. All the couples that passed by him covered their noses in disgust and hurried away.

He attempted to blend in with the crowd, but they instinctively avoided him. He felt isolated from the rest of the world.

He was alone. He was walking on a wire as the sky hung above him and earth beneath him; but heaven did not welcome him, and the doors to hell never opened for him.

The festive atmosphere was heavy on this street; a store even hosted a limited-time sale to lure in customers. Almost as soon as they made their announcement, flocks of loving couples swarmed in like bees and caused a commotion. A young couple was so engrossed in their own little world during the rush that they didn't notice they knocked a blind girl down to the ground.

The girl's walking stick also dropped, which was then kicked away by the crowd that walked past it. The auntie accompanying her out was not beside the girl right now. No one noticed this blind little girl amidst the commotion and noises on the street. She was sitting helplessly by herself, almost being stepped on a few times by pedestrians.

Only the same lone man noticed her. Xie Lanshan walked over, picked up the walking stick, and then helped the girl up.

There was a foul scent on this man, but the blind girl didn't mind it. She held the man's hand gleefully and said thank you.

Xie Lanshan noticed there were injuries on the girl's hands and knees from the fall, and helped her to a little flower bed on the side of the street to rest.

The girl looked to be around seventeen years old and had a round face; it wasn't conventionally attractive, but it was pretty. She couldn't see but smiled brightly as she looked forward despite her injuries. She swung around her thin legs as if she was in a good mood.

Out of inexplicable curiosity, Xie Lanshan asked, "Did you come with a friend?"

"No, I came with my auntie," the girl responded truthfully, still with a smile on her face. "I asked her to take me out."

It must not be voluntary for a middle-aged woman to take her niece out to shop during Valentine's Day. Xie Lanshan shook his head and commented nonchalantly, "There's no need to come out on a holiday."

"Even a blind girl like me doesn't want to be alone. I want to experience love," the girl responded bluntly. "I was blinded from taking the wrong medication when I was young. I don't have memories of seeing a beautiful world, and I've never had anyone to celebrate Valentine's Day with."

During the conversation, another young couple walked by. The boy was tall and thin, and the pretty girl beside him barely reached his shoulders even with heels on.

The girl held a bouquet of roses in hand, complaining to her boyfriend as they walked that flowers are useless, that there was no need to buy such a large bouquet on Valentine's Day.

The blind girl quickly could tell from the tone of voice that those complaints were jokes, as it was heartwarming to receive flowers on a day like this.

That couple with the significant height difference walked off. The blind girl sniffed hard in the night as if she wanted to take in the fresh smell of roses through the breeze. Suddenly, her expression dimmed as she said to Xie Lanshan with great envy, "I also want someone to give me flowers, better if the person is a pretty boy. But what kind of pretty boy would ever fall for a blind girl? Don't worry, I'm just talking to myself..."

Xie Lanshan looked up and saw some street vendors selling flowers across the street. There was a little boy among the sellers who had flowers that looked a lot less vibrant than his competitors, making his business much slower than others. He seemed as if he didn't want to stay in the cold for too long for the next far-off customer.

"Give me a second." Xie Lanshan stood up, walked swiftly past the crowd, and made his way toward the boy selling flowers. He had no money on him now. The only thing that might be worth something was the bullet necklace that hung around his neck.

He took his necklace off, walked toward the boy, and said, "Can I exchange this for just one rose from you?"

"Is this a real bullet?" The boy said, his eyes beaming.

"As real as it can get." Xie Lanshan nodded.

The boy seemed to be interested in it. He figured he wasn't going to make more money today and accepted the offer. Then he picked up a withering flower from his basket and handed it to the man.

Xie Lanshan took this withering red rose and gave it to the girl waiting by the street.

As if he intended to fulfill all the girl's wishes today, he knelt before this blind girl, held up her hand, and placed it on his cheek. He smiled gently at her and said, "I'm the most beautiful wandering lover of this world. You can touch me if you don't believe me."

The girl held the rose in one hand and touched the man's face with her other trembling hand. Her fingers brushed against his deep eye socket, tall nose bridge, the sweet lips that lifted into a smile, and down his handsome chin. She had no doubt this man was good-looking, as if he was from a beautiful dream.

"You're really... really pretty..." A light blush surfaced on the girl's cheeks. Her blind eyes also seemed to glow for an instant and she said, "You're also... a really

good person...”

Xie Lanshan’s heart jumped at this comment. He wanted to say something, but nothing came out of his trembling mouth.

The girl’s aunt finally walked out of a discount store at this moment and saw the bloody and disheveled man. She screamed in horror.

After Xie Lanshan ran off, the aunt took the girl to the nearest police station to report the man.

Because the Hanhai City municipal bureau was the first location that handled Ling Yun’s case, the violent crimes unit was allowed to conduct investigations outside of their standard territories. Captain Tao just so happened to be at the local bureau in this area with his team members. A portion of the remaining Blue Fox members and local police officers were also at the station.

In front of these cops, the middle-aged woman said with confidence, “I’ve seen this man on an arrest warrant. He looked quite civilized, but I didn’t think he was such a perverted man! Thank goodness I discovered him quickly. Otherwise, I can’t imagine what he could have done to our little Zhenzhen...”

The woman’s voice was sharp and high. Tao Longyue and Xiao Liang exchanged a glance. They couldn’t explain the situation to the public and could only listen to the woman complain loudly.

The Xie Lanshan now had already been deeply influenced by Ye Shen’s character. No one knew how far down the man had fallen and whether he would lay a hand on an innocent girl.

After the woman was finished, Tao Longyue squatted down and faced the blind girl. Despite knowing that she couldn’t see anything, he remained respectful and asked her gently, “Did that person harm you?”

The girl felt the heavy air and clear animosity within the bureau the moment she stepped in. The atmosphere puzzled her, but she also felt strangely annoyed. She stared forward with her hollow eyes. Before all the adults who could supposedly see more clearly than her, this blind girl said with absolute confidence, “He’s a good person.”

(iii)

After learning that nearly half of his teammates lost their lives in that storage unit, Chi Jin had thought about taking his own life to repent.

They were all young men around the same age. They had just been joking around and chatting joyously yesterday, but now they had all vanished into dust today—only remembered by their heroic souls. Chi Jin didn’t return to the Blue Fox’s headquarters, but he knew even without having to go that his captain must have shed tears for his comrades.

Chi Jin sat in a room with the lights off and took a sip of burning white wine. He clenched the gun in his hands and cried silently but tragically and full of regret.

He withstood that burning sensation of the alcohol and allowed all the regret and hatred to evaporate from his body. Realizing death would not solve anything, he set the gun down. He finally decided to face his fears and stop running.

Chi Jin stood in the dark and carefully packed a few bottles of the familiar cough syrup through the dim glow of the moonlight outside the window. He filled out the delivery slip and set the package in front of his door for the delivery person. He left a message and waited for the package to be picked up.

He put the guns and explosives he took from the team into his backpack and then packed some more personal items. Chi Jin locked his door and left. He stepped on the shadows of the trees cast by the moonlight and walked forward without hesitation. He prepared himself to complete his own revenge and prove his courage.

Mu Kun kept massive loads of red ice to trade with the Brazilian merchant Mariano, so he decided he would act first and intercept the red ice the day of the trade.

The bosses on both sides wouldn't show their faces easily, so Mariano ordered his men to contact Miss T first. Chi Jin was aware of this beforehand. Mu Kun had already labeled him as a coward who would betray his own teammates and relied on him to open up the roads to export the goods.

As the vice captain of the Blue Fox, Chi Jin had outstanding physical abilities that kept him at the top of the pack in close combat. In addition, Mu Kun's subordinates hadn't watched him too closely at first, which made it easy for him to kill the lackeys without trouble. He quickly took the truck filled with red ice and drove it away.

It enraged Mu Kun when he received the news. He had thought the kid was under his control after the acts of betrayal and forced consumption of red ice, that the kid was merely a puppet in the palm of his hand, but the young cop still surprised him.

He looked back and noticed even Xie Lanshan had managed to escape. Mu Kun's anger boiled, flames of hatred burned violently as he swore to kill Chi Jin using methods even more tortuous than what he had done to Ling Yun.

But the trouble Chi Jin left was quite a handful. Mariano had already paid a massive deposit and was demanding to receive his goods right away. The entire province was under heavy lockdown to fight against the drug trade. It was already difficult to stock raw materials. There was no time to remake the goods. This situation frustrated Mu Kun. He wasn't in full control of the Golden Triangle yet and couldn't afford to face another powerful enemy.

So he promised the merchant that he would find the intercepted goods as soon as possible.

Of course, Chi Jin knew the plan.

He arrived at the city where the storage unit was, called Miss T, then demanded, "Send Ling Yun to St. Gor Hospital."

St. Gor was the best hospital in the area with state-of-the-art equipment.

“Where are the goods?” Miss T laughed as she saw the kid attempt to play nice after a betrayal. “You need to tell me where the goods are first before you can negotiate.”

“The goods are in my hands right now. You’re the one who can’t negotiate with me. Send Ling Yun to the hospital, or I’ll burn your product.” Chi Jin hung up the phone after he tossed this cold ultimatum out.

His attitude was stern and unambiguous, so the drug dealers had no choice but to act as he said. They tossed Ling Yun in front of the St. Gor Hospital during the night. The entire provincial branch was shocked when they heard the news. Despite being covered in injuries, the hospital promised to treat Ling Yun and help the best they could, and that it was very likely they could at least save his life.

Chi Jin let out a long sigh of relief as soon as he heard that Ling Yun passed the critical stage from the news. He could now continue his plan without any additional burdens on his shoulders. Of course, the plan he had in mind was simple yet effective. He jotted down Mariano’s contact information from the man’s subordinate. He contacted the Brazilian merchant and requested to make a trade. Chi Jin told him he would give the entire truck full of red ice to the man if he could give Chi Jin some money to run.

The young officer understood greed; Mariano may have paid Mu Kun a hefty deposit, but it couldn’t compare to the value of that much red ice. There was no reason for him to decline paying out a little extra to take the entire truck away.

After settling on a time and place, Chi Jin gave Miss T another call to meet up at the same time and place he had promised Mariano.

Chi Jin picked out a good place for an ambush. There were two plans he had in mind. If Mu Kun showed up, he would just kill the man right on the spot. If Mu Kun was careful and didn’t show up personally, he would kill Mariano or a key subordinate of the drug lord. The relationship had become rocky over this transaction, so one bullet through a skull could easily become the trigger for war between two parties—which would then give him an opportunity to eliminate the drug lord.

Yet reality differed from expectation. The plan was like trying to fit a key into the right keyhole, but these perfect scenarios were only for the movies. As Chi Jin expected, Mu Kun didn’t show even when it was time to meet.

Chi Jin hid in a place about thirty meters from the exact location of the meeting place. He saw from afar that Mu Kun was sitting inside the car, observing.

It was too far away for a precise aim from a handgun, so Chi Jin changed his plan and waited for Mariano to come, ready to take down the first person to show up.

Unfortunately, he underestimated Mu Kun’s slyness. Ever since the first phone call, Mu Kun had already guessed that the young man had a plan to take them all down at once. He soon gave Mariano a call to indicate that he would accept the offer to lure the traitor in and take back his goods.

The person who Chi Jin took down was only a lackey and not Mariano himself. The bait dressed to look flashy but he was really a nameless person under the Brazilian merchant.

Thus, Chi Jin exposed his location at that moment. Both sides turned their guns in his direction and began firing rapidly.

Bullets rained down at that instant; even with Chi Jin's dexterity, he wasn't able to dodge the deadly shower and took a bullet in the leg. Picking a fight with the fierce lions meant he had to prepare for a bloodbath. Unlike his Type 64 pistol, the weapons used by the arms merchants were much deadlier. One shot through his leg was enough to blow open a fist-sized hole that pierced through his bone.

Mu Kun finally walked out and showed himself when Chi Jin was dragged from the ruins with his broken leg.

The young man was pushed to the ground like a defeated stray dog before him, his limbs still bleeding.

"You think you can take my life with a silly trick like this? Fool!" Mu Kun's nose crinkled as he sniffed the fresh smell of blood from the young man. He then lifted a leg and stepped heavily on the broken limb and said, "Tell me, where did you put my goods?"

Mu Kun was a perverse man who enjoyed personally interrogating his prey. Chi Jin was aware of this and knew he couldn't escape after causing such a commotion.

Chi Jin was beaten until blood covered his face, and just when everyone thought he was on his last breath, he suddenly lifted his head and grinned. Blood mingled with his saliva and dripped from his mouth in that almost horrendous smile.

He pulled out a hand grenade from his pocket.

Mu Kun realized what was happening, cursed out loud, and quickly retreated. He didn't think that this seemingly foolish child could have kept another card up his sleeve in face of his meticulous calculations.

The truth was, Chi Jin had planned everything intending to give his life. While the best-case scenario was to kill the drug lord as he sparked a fight between the two parties, he knew he had to at least find a chance to get close to Mu Kun if it didn't work out.

He could only repay his sins with his life. He had planned to take Mu Kun to the afterlife with him from the very start.

Everyone backed up in fear as Chi Jin lifted and pulled the safety pin. At the instant his flesh exploded into pieces of confetti, he closed his eyes. He saw a man appear within an unearthly world of light. The man carried a young Chi Jin out through the burning fire; his figure was tall, his shoulders wide and strong. From then on, the young boy saw a world full of possibilities and found the holy grail he would follow for the rest of his life.

His vision before death was almost soothing. Chi Jin chanted silently with a smile in the end:

For my captain.

(iv)

Aside from Chi Jin's shattered corpse, there were other dead bodies at the scene of the explosion, but Mu Kun was nowhere to be found. The evil and mad drug lord hadn't met his end and once again escaped.

According to the analysis of the local police department, Mu Kun was likely injured from the incident. The several hideouts he had within the city were completely cleared out after the explosion, and according to reliable intel from Myanmar, Mu Kun was now in the territories of the Golden Triangle.

Ling Yun was saved and Xie Lanshan was still on the run. Tao Longyue didn't receive any new orders and took the train back to the municipal bureau to report his findings.

The Spring Festival had passed and the weather was sunny for once. White clouds were visible in the clear blue sky that seemed like beautiful lace behind clean silk; even the grayish roads were shimmering beneath the light. Tao Longyue left the train station and rushed toward the municipal bureau without stopping by his house.

There was no one inside the chief's office; he was supposedly meeting with a guest right now. Tao Longyue knew this was the perfect opportunity and walked right into the reception room. As expected, Director Peng from the provincial branch and Captain Sui from the Blue Foxes were both sitting in the reception room, discussing important matters with Liu Yanbo and Tao Jun on the side.

Tao Longyue slammed down his gun on the table before the director, and said, "I can't do this anymore."

This kind of attitude was frowned upon during formal occasions. It was even as serious as a capital offense in ancient times. Of course, while rules were laxer today, it was still inappropriate to pull out a gun before a direct supervisor in this manner. Tao Jun scolded him frantically, "What kind of attitude is this? Nonsense!"

Unlike his normal explosive attitude, Tao Longyue only glanced at his own father with a surprising calmness in his eyes as he said, "I can't continue this job if I have to arrest Xie Lanshan."

Director Peng's expression grew cold, but he didn't speak. Beside him, Sui Hong looked up to face Tao Longyue and said, "Please explain."

Tao Longyue was grieving, not for himself but for Xie Lanshan. His lips trembled slightly; the bright sun that always shone in the bureau finally broke down before his own father and boss.

"Even a blind little girl said he was a good person. But look at us, we may not be blind, but our hearts are; why are we so insistent on forcing him down this deadly path? Just what has he done wrong?" Tao Longyue clenched his fist. His eyes reddened as he said with overflowing emotion, "Li Rui messed with his car, but he

would rather crash and send himself to the ER than harm a single innocent pedestrian on the road. If he wasn't on the ship during the cruise case, do you think any of those girls would have survived? Aren't these all cases that he solved after that damned surgery? I know a-Lan was a quiet and strict person in the past, so maybe that part of him did change, but his heart never did. His heart was always dedicated to his country, to his people, and it's always burned more passionately than the hottest iron stove in the world!"

Director Peng didn't speak and Captain Sui remained wordless. Even Liu Yanbo's stern face seemed to soften up a little. Tao Longyue's usual deep voice rang even more powerfully in the silence. He continued with this same scolding energy, "His body may have died in the Golden Triangle, but his soul lived on. A-Lan is still a-Lan, we can't let him give his life once and then strip his honor away from him and demand a second death..." Tao Longyue waved his tensed-up arm as he reached his limit, and tears finally rolled down his eyes as he said, "Do you all think this is fucking something we can and should do to him?!"

Director Peng remained in the same position, with his hands overlapping as Tao Longyue spoke. His eyebrows furrowed; his gaze was cold and hard like ice.

After another long and bated silence, Director Peng finally let out a long sigh. His icy eyes also seemed to have melted and reignited with warmth. He slowly opened his mouth, but every word he spoke was powerful and stern. "Let's put Xie Lanshan's arrest aside for now. Young Xie... has been through too much lately."

This "too much" comment had a certain weight to it. Two words were not enough to capture the inhumane treatment Xie Lanshan had dealt with these past days, but because they came out of Director Peng's mouth, that at least meant neither Xie Lanshan nor Ye Shen would have to fear the guns of the police from now on. A mix of emotions poured into Tao Longyue as he choked up slightly. The bittersweetness after releasing his pent-up frustration finally caught up to him as he lowered his head and wiped away the tears on his face.

He even cursed at himself. *Damn, stop being so fucking sentimental!*

Sui Hong watched this crying, headstrong captain and also let out a sigh as he shook his head. He said to Tao Longyue, "Captain Tao, I spoke with Director Peng about this case, and we still believe there is a spy within the special task force. Judging from Mu Kun's reaction, he seemed to have a good grasp of our rescue plan, but Xie Lanshan is no longer in the bureau. I believe the real spy must be someone else. Do you happen to have anyone you suspect?"

Tao Longyue stood back upright and pulled himself out of mourning. After some thought, he responded, "Chi Jin is already dead, but judging by his intention to take Mu Kun down with him, I don't think he gave out any information about the rescue mission. As for members that have participated since the start of the mission, aside from the Blue Fox, only Chief Liu and I are from the municipal bureau..." Tao Longyue gave two names but shifted his gaze slightly toward Liu Yanbo.

Liu Yanbo returned the glance without hesitation but still felt uneasy. After serving as a police officer for more than half of his life and facing retirement soon, he had never betrayed his profession or beliefs, even at his high rank. However, this was an odd occurrence. The Blue Fox lost almost half of its members on the mission; it was unlikely the spy came out of them. Tao Longyue may have been rough and rash at times, but he was still a passionate man with a good heart of justice. He looked nothing like a spy.

A little ray of sunlight slowly vanished from the window. The shadow cast over the cell phone also disappeared and exposed the item like the claws of a beast. Liu Yanbo's gaze suddenly fell onto his phone following the disappearing shadow. He quickly thought of his son and came up with a horrific assumption based on the young man's recent strange acts.

Sui Hong stood up as he left the seniors to continue discussing the matter and said to Tao Longyue, "Captain Tao, I have someone I'd like you to meet."

Captain Sui of the Blue Fox was a commander of words and elegance. Unlike the leaders of the judicial departments, who often give off a stern air of authority or intimidating force, he was a courteous and classy man who carried exceptional merits. Even if Tao Longyue could show resistance against other leaders, he was always very respectful to Captain Sui.

It had only been a short while since they last met, but Tao Longyue noticed the man had changed a lot. Despite Captain Sui's relatively young age, Tao Longyue already saw white at the roots of the man's hair.

Tao Longyue sympathized with the man; losing even one member of his team was the heaviest blow a captain could face, however, the man still walked with his head high and tall like a warrior who refused to bow down. On the other hand, his eyebrows never fully lifted in relief. His forehead creased slightly even when he smiled; the melancholic color seemed to be painted on his face.

Tao Longyue followed Sui Hong out the door and walked down the staircase to the reception rooms located on the lower levels.

Sui Hong coughed violently once again as they arrived in front of another reception room. Tao Longyue was worried about his health and asked, "Captain Sui, do you want to go to the hospital?"

"It's been going on for a while, don't worry." Sui Hong faintly smiled as he pulled out a bottle of cough syrup from his pocket. He didn't open it up to take a sip and simply played around with the bottle in his palms, looking down at it.

The small brown bottle was easy to carry around. Sui Hong had grown used to having the bottle around him over these years.

"I've never seen this brand. How is it?" Tao Longyue didn't know where the cough syrup came from and asked nonchalantly.

Sui Hong didn't answer but kept his gaze on the small bottle in his hand. He would still cough every once in a while as his eyes grew red—not in a bloodthirsty way, but

as if they contained years of sorrow.

Tao Longyue couldn't understand the grief behind that gaze, but he knew he shouldn't interrupt the man. However, Sui Hong was a man of discipline, so he simply shook his head with a smile and then quickly placed the bottle back into his pocket. He explained everything to Tao Longyue, "We've received intel that Mu Kun is currently negotiating a trade with a Brazilian arms merchant to exchange red ice for heavy weapons. He wants to take over the Golden Triangle and clean up Guan Nuoqin's old subordinates. Even though he prepared a little over one ton of red ice, Chi Jin stole it all."

"Over one ton?" Tao Longyue gasped in shock. "Based on the current market price of red ice, that's at least seven to eight billion yuan!"

Sui Hong nodded and said, "The entire country is currently launching a strict antidrug policy right now. Not only is it difficult to obtain raw materials, but it would also take at least two to three months to produce over a ton of red ice even if they found the ingredients. The Golden Triangle is a dangerous place right now; Guan Nuoqin's followers still want to find a chance to regain power, and because Mu Kun is injured, he needs to find the missing red ice as soon as he can. This man would never give up at a time like this—and we can use his desperation right now to lure him out of his den."

"But with how sly Mu Kun is, he won't fall for bait that easily. If a-Lan was still here..." Tao Longyue stopped himself. He knew they owed the man too much now and had no reason to ask Xie Lanshan to risk his life again.

"We can't rely on Xie Lanshan alone. Chi Jin hid the red ice he intercepted. Neither we nor Mu Kun know where it is." Sui Hong's eyes would dim a little at every mention of Xie Lanshan's name, but he continued after clearing his throat, "If Mu Kun is in a rush to find that ton of red ice, we should prepare what he wants and send someone out to trade with him..."

Tao Longyue asked, puzzled, "We can get some bits and pieces of red ice on the market, but where are we going to get a whole ton of completely pure ice?"

Sui Hong smiled and said, "We don't need one ton, only a bit of real ice to lure him in. The rest could be fake, as long as it's enough to make Mu Kun's men believe it's real."

Sui Hong opened the door to the reception room as they spoke. A young man who looked the part of a thug was sitting inside casually with a leg up on the table.

Tao Longyue recognized the man's face. He was the one who Xiao Liang had arrested. He scolded the man on instinct, "Zang Yifeng, what the heck did you do now?"

"I didn't do anything. *You* guys want me to cause trouble and I can't even refuse."

"Explain yourself, and get that leg down!"

"Captain Tao, I'm the one who invited him over." Sui Hong walked into the room and closed the door behind him. He explained, "I recalled that your unit once captured

someone who made fake red ice. We can use him to fight against Mu Kun.”

Zang Yifeng squinted and quirked up the corner of his mouth, then said as if he had no intention of getting involved, “I said I ain’t gonna do it! Don’t give me all that about merits and laws. What makes you think a bastard lowlife like me would work for the country? You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

Sui Hong smiled at him and said, “Why put yourself down like this? We’ve tested the red ice you made in the labs. There’s a substance inside very similar chemically to drug-relief medicine that can help suppress narcotic effects and be used to help rehab. So you’re no bastard, you’re a genius chemist and a good person.”

“Stop, stop it right now, don’t give me that! I hate drug addicts and drugs, but that doesn’t mean I’m a good guy!” Zang Yifeng cried out in anger, then quickly calmed down. His eyes dimmed until his pupils looked like two black stains, as though they contained a painful scar. He continued to speak at a lower volume, “It’s just that someone close to me got killed after taking drugs. I also got jailtime for selling and couldn’t protect her at the time she needed me most... anyway, go find someone else. Can’t believe you guys think a murderer is a cop! I won’t work for you guys!”

Sui Hong was a little surprised at these words; he was certain this man had seen Xie Lanshan and perhaps had some history with Ye Shen as well.

Tao Longyue said angrily, “Do you not want to clear your records?”

“Now that’s bribery!” But Zang Yifeng insisted on not helping and continued to sit with his legs up on the chair, staring right at Sui Hong and then glancing with disgust toward Tao Longyue on the side. “You look more reliable. I’m not talking with that big ol’ bear guy beside you!”

“Hey, you—”

The door opened once again and a man stood against the light.

Tao Longyue turned to look and could almost feel his jaw drop to the ground. He called out, stuttering, “Sh-Shen Liufei? You’re alive!”

(v)

Zang Yifeng didn’t recognize Shen Liufei, but the artist certainly recognized the man. His gaze scanned the entire room, going from Sui Hong to Tao Longyue, and then finally focusing on Zang Yifeng’s face.

Tao Longyue rejoiced as soon as he saw Shen Liufei because that meant Xie Lanshan would no longer wander. He rushed up and gave the artist a warm embrace and said, “Mr. Shen, I’m so glad you’re back!”

Faced with an overly excited Tao Longyue, Shen Liufei took a step back to dodge the hug and only responded with a gentle nod. Pieces of his memories had returned, but the scenes that flashed before his eyes still seemed too unrealistic—like they were hidden behind a silk screen or fog. Even this passionate Captain Tao was still a stranger to him.

Yet Shen Liufei remained calm and collected, so Tao Longyue didn't notice the change in the man. He stopped himself in time and scratched his head as he said, "A-Lan... I'm sure you heard about Xie Lanshan's situation already, huh?"

Only at the mention of the name did Shen Liufei's eyes light up a little, like a small but graceful candlelight behind the shadows.

Zang Yifeng was a guest here, and if he insisted on not cooperating with the case, even Sui Hong couldn't force him to comply. The thug had never been able to stand tall in front of these police officers and was enjoying this minor victory in his mind. Under the angry glares of Captain Tao, he strutted out of Hanhai City's municipal bureau.

Zang Yifeng had only walked a block when he noticed someone was tailing him.

He hung out with criminals and was alert to danger, so he acted as if he was glancing nonchalantly at a store window and carefully checked his surroundings but didn't find anyone.

His heart was still restless, even if there wasn't anyone around. He wrapped his jacket tighter around himself and sprinted back home.

He opened his door to see a large backpack resting inside.

Before heading off to the municipal bureau, Zang Yifeng contacted a-Xia and learned that Xie Lanshan was still in contact with her. So, he purchased a train ticket and packed all of his luggage as quickly as he could. Afraid the people from the municipal bureau would continue to pester him, he grabbed the bag and rushed out of the house without even stopping to sit.

The streets were empty after the holiday. Zang Yifeng walked on the quiet roads and once again noticed someone tailing him. The person also didn't intend to hide. The footsteps behind him kept a respectful but confident distance from him. Zang Yifeng's heart sank; he knew he was in big trouble.

He began taking larger strides forward and broke off into a run. Near the end of the street, Zang Yifeng turned to the right and then quickly attacked the incoming stalker.

Shen Liufei reacted swiftly, dodging the attack.

"Why are you following me?" Zang Yifeng was used to fighting his way out of trouble, so the missed ambush didn't bother him. He quickly lifted his fist and threw it toward Shen Liufei. His idea was to beat the man down with force first and then interrogate him later to find out the man's intentions.

After seeing the man successfully dodge the second punch, Zang Yifeng worked up all of his energy to throw more punches, each one heavier than the next. Yet he couldn't have imagined that this exquisite Mr. Shen was actually an expert in close combat.

Finding an opening, Shen Liufei lifted a hand after dodging all attacks and twisted Zang Yifeng's wrist. He pulled up his other arm and then locked the man's throat in his hand.

Shen Liufei pressed the man onto the moldy walls and said courteously beside Zang Yifeng's ear, "We can continue this pointless fighting game or sit down and have a peaceful talk."

Zang Yifeng knew he couldn't fight back with the hand locked on his throat and nodded.

Shen Liufei glanced at the backpack that was tossed to the side and asked, "Are you going on a trip?"

Zang Yifeng waved his sore arms and could only answer reluctantly, in fear of being beaten. "I'm looking for a friend."

Shen Liufei asked, "Xie Lanshan?"

He explained after seeing the man's eyes grow wide, "I checked the train ticket you purchased as soon as I entered the bureau. If you're heading near the China-Myanmar border, I'm assuming you're going to visit Xie Lanshan over there."

"H-he's a wanted criminal and I'm just a gangster," Zang Yifeng stuttered as he tried to give an excuse. "We might have met out of pure coincidence, but I have no reason to go outta my way to find him."

"Of course you have no business looking for Xie Lanshan," Shen Liufei said as his eyebrows furrowed, his expression grave. "But what if the person you're looking for is actually Ye Shen?"

Zang Yifeng couldn't believe his deepest secret would be exposed like this. Like a snake that had been struck at its weak point, he froze and closed his mouth.

Shen Liufei continued, "I know that you've already recognized that the Xie Lanshan now is Ye Shen since the first time you met him. I also know that you assumed he killed your girlfriend, Zhuo Tian."

Zang Yifeng recovered from his state of shock and fired back, "I didn't assume; I know he's the murderer! He's a disgusting man!"

It had been quite gruesome. The accounts stated that Ye Shen never ran, even after Zhuo Tian called the police. By the time the cops entered his house, the suspect was perched by the window. The entire floor and his whole body were covered in blood. Only the moonlight showered on his long hair as he caressed a piece of fresh human skin in his hands gently and lovingly. He'd faced the cops pointing their guns at him with a smile and said, "I've been waiting for you all."

They discovered more than one person's DNA and skin in his house, as if collecting such items was nothing more than a perverse personal hobby for him.

The piece of skin he had been holding in his hand was from Zhuo Tian.

Ye Shen didn't explain the other human skins in his house, but confessed fully to two particular cases. He admitted to being the culprit of the family massacre from a decade ago and to being the one who murdered Zhuo Tian.

According to the police investigation, he was the neighbor of the family that was murdered when he was young. He was able to give a detailed account of the crime, admitting to some aspects even the police weren't aware of. They also discovered the

murder weapon at the crime scene with only Ye Shen's fingerprints on the knife handle. Since the testimonies and evidence matched up, the case was solved without trouble.

Shen Liufei asked, "Have you met him before?"

Zang Yifeng responded, "I've never met him and he doesn't know who I am. But a-Tian fell for him like she went mad before her death, telling me every day that she'd met a very attractive man. I tailed her a few times and saw Ye Shen that way."

"Attractive?" Shen Liufei could tell she didn't simply mean his good looks and said, "Please explain."

"A-Tian said that he wasn't interested in women but respects them a lot. He told her that women are symbols of beauty and kindness, that they're like spring buds of flowers. But he also said that some women are not aware of their own power and allow themselves to sink into the abyss of drugs and violence. They don't know how to escape and don't dare to fight back—he even said that he wants to save these women and help them recognize the inner beauty they had inside them like some sort of delusional hero. A-Tian was head over heels with this nonsensical logic and even tried to break up with me. But how could I have known the guy was just a damned crook!"

Shen Liufei fell into silence; the occasional hints Xie Lanshan had shown in fighting poison with poison while solving cases seemed to have a clear explanation now.

"I've been tracking down Ye Shen's whereabouts ever since I got released from jail, and heard that he was sentenced to death, that he even donated his body right before he died. He was an orphan, so no family even came in to check his body. I always assumed he was really dead until I saw him one day on the news. I think it was some mass kidnapping case on a cruise. They said he saved a ship full of high school girls... I first thought it was just someone who looked like him because it wasn't impossible to find similar faces, especially with the huge population in China. But I double-checked just in case, and after I saw him with my own eyes, I confirmed he was that twisted murderer who committed his first crime at fourteen. I will never forget those eyes of his, those arrogant, cocky..."

Shen Liufei nodded in agreement with those words. Vengeance could turn people's eyes sharp, he knew from experience. He also recognized upon first glance at Xie Lanshan that there were traces of Ye Shen in him; the kind of arrogance that regarded human life like toys was not something that could easily be hidden.

"So I decided to stay in Hanhai, and purposely caused some trouble near the municipal bureau just so I could be arrested. I wanted to get close to him and confirm my suspicion with my own eyes. And then he became a wanted criminal soon after. I walked in and out of the municipal bureau so often that I'm practically on a first-name basis with that Officer Xiao Liang. I overheard a conversation about some 'memory transplant' and that's how I confirmed my suspicion was correct. This guy really is Ye

Shen.” Zang Yifeng paused at that moment and cried with his face behind his hand. “Why did they allow a sinful murderer a chance to be reborn? And even turn him into a national hero? And my a-Tian, my a-Tian’s lying alone beneath the earth. I don’t even know where her body is right now.”

Shen Liufei empathized with the man’s agony and waited until he vented all his frustrations before saying, “The local police acted immediately after Zhuo Tian reported the crime; Ye Shen didn’t have enough time to hide a body. The police already searched all possible locations around his house that could hide a body, but found nothing. Have you considered the possibility that Zhuo Tian wasn’t killed, that her body wasn’t dismembered, and that maybe she ran away on her own?”

“How is that possible?” Zang Yifeng growled. “Even if she had plans to run and hide, why would she still run away after the police came?”

“That’s a question for you.” Shen Liufei’s sharp gaze locked on the man as he asked, “Did Zhuo Tian do drugs?”

“S-she didn’t!” Zang Yifeng denied in shock.

“I’ve asked someone to investigate your background privately, so I have more information on her than the cops do. You two lived together for a long time; since you used to sell and do drugs, doesn’t that mean she was likely doing drugs with you?”

“So what if she did!” Seeing that he could no longer hide, Zang Yifeng admitted and asked, “Does that mean she deserved to die because she was a druggie?”

“The police captured you for drug dealing at the time and didn’t expose your girlfriend, but that doesn’t mean the police wouldn’t investigate her. I have a guess. Because she was also involved in the drug trade with you, there was no way she could show her face before the police, so she chose to go missing after calling the police.”

Zang Yifeng instinctively defended Zhuo Tian and said menacingly, “Your guess is baseless! You’re just trying to pin the blame on the victim!”

Shen Liufei said, “My assumption is based on the fact that we’ve found Zhuo Tian’s body. It wasn’t in the city Ye Shen lived in, it was near the border of Thailand and Myanmar thousands of kilometers away. She was tossed into a mass grave; all the victims inside were female prostitutes from the red-light districts. These young women were sold off or kidnapped, or had their own reasons to sell their bodies.”

Zang Yifeng’s expression was bizarre; he opened his mouth as if he was breathing in water, his eyeballs rolled around in different directions. Shen Liufei caught this strange and unpleasant emotion on his face.

Shen Liufei narrowed his eyes and said, “If you two were a drug-dealing couple, perhaps you talked about moving to the Golden Triangle to escape the stricter laws and shrinking market here in China?”

Zang Yifeng choked on his own spit for an instant, then finally let out a sigh and nodded his head. He said darkly, “We did talk about that right before she was murdered.”

He raised his voice again and cried out in anger, “And so what if we did? Even if a-Tian died in Myanmar, that doesn’t mean that man could torture her like that. Why did he let her bleed out so much and even rip off a piece of her skin? And why did he admit to killing her? Can you imagine how big the man’s ego is? He didn’t even run when the cops came. It’s like he was waiting to be arrested!”

If Zhuo Tian never died in his hands, why did Ye Shen choose to shoulder the blame for her murder?

Shen Liufei couldn’t find a reasonable answer—Zang Yifeng’s question was also his. After a long while, he finally said, “I don’t think he actually killed any of the women he ripped the skin off of. Perhaps his actual intent was to save them. If Zhuo Tian never sold herself off in the Golden Triangle, perhaps she would have had the same fate as the first victim from the family massacre; that young mother who suffered through years of abuse and harassment who couldn’t stand up for herself is living in peace somewhere in this world.”

Zang Yifeng’s eyes widened. “How could you be so sure?”

Shen Liufei looked at him calmly and said, “I’m the survivor of that massacre, the son of that young mother.”

Zang Yifeng’s shocked expression froze. His body trembled for a long while until even he felt his world shatter. He only repeated the words, “I don’t believe... I can’t believe...”

“If you don’t believe me, then bring me to the man you’re looking for. I’ll prove it to you.”

Zang Yifeng finally said that Xie Lanshan was keeping in contact with an old friend of his, a-Xia, in order to find Mu Kun. A-Xia had hung around Miss T and knew the people in the organization well. Zang Yifeng could ask her for potential places where Xie Lanshan might hide.

(vi)

Xie Lanshan sat alone in front of the dinner table at sundown. The corners of the table had worn over years of use. There was nothing on the table, not even food or water.

Night fell quickly. The last ray of light escaped through the window, but shone on his face.

This was a place a-Xia had told him about. Every city seemed to have a blind spot the police couldn’t reach and many drug addicts gathered in these places like bacteria growing in a mossy corner.

His whole body felt heavy, as if lead filled his veins. Xie Lanshan’s face was wet, and his bangs were as well, though he was unsure if it was from sweat or tears. The reopened wound still hadn’t been treated and his fever continued to burn, though it had developed into a much more serious one.

Xie Lanshan stared blankly ahead of him—there was nothing and nobody there.

The “good person” comment from that blind girl had touched on his weak spot. These two words were like a sandstorm in his mind. He tried to fight against it but felt his soul continuously being tugged and pulled by different forces, leaving him in agony.

By one inch, then two inches—the ray of light shifted like the last remaining spark of fire grasping for life in an extinguished stove. Another one inch, two inches—and the room was finally left in darkness.

His eyes had grown used to this despairing blackness. Yet the moment he lifted his heavy eyelids, a strong light shone through. The light expanded like threads on a fabric and he saw a man within this blinding light. It was a man who looked identical to himself. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say the man was himself.

Xie Lanshan never imagined he would face himself under these circumstances. For an instant, he thought he was either on the brink of madness or having a hallucination from the fever, that everything was just a dream.

Yet the world told him that he was sitting right in front of himself right now. Xie Lanshan was sitting in front of Xie Lanshan.

Xie Lanshan’s wet hair fell onto his shoulders, his white shirt covered in bloodstains and dust, completely disarrayed. But the man sitting in front of him was wearing a police uniform; beneath the cap was a clean short haircut and deep eyes. His gaze was confident but kind, his expression highlighted by the warm light around him like a saint of purity.

Xie Lanshan let out a snarl at this ironic scene, which tugged at the corner of his lips as he said, “It’s you.”

The man across from him said, “It’s me.”

Xie Lanshan leaned in to stare at this identical face. He clapped his hands together like a beggar and asked, “Can you tell me who you are, and who I am?”

The man smiled. “I’m you.”

“No, you’re not...” Xie Lanshan’s eyes widened as he shook his head. “They said that I’m not you. I don’t even know who I am...”

According to most people in this world, good and evil were separate sides. Heroes and villains were never synonyms in any language.

To the drug enforcement officer Xie Lanshan, he would have successfully completed his mission and returned in victory if it wasn’t for the deadly accident. If he hadn’t gone through the absurd surgery, he would have returned to his home as a martyr. His coffin would have been covered in the red flag, fresh flowers would have decorated his tombstone. Perhaps many years later, people would sing the song of his heroic deeds to their children.

As for the criminal on death row Ye Shen, he was a vile murderer who should have been rejoicing at this chance to live on. He was reborn through this surgery and received all the abilities of a special forces officer—he could have easily used this

newfound knowledge and his physical abilities to escape the shackles of law.

But he was still in pain.

The man before him looked gently at him and said confidently, "Then follow your heart."

What was in his heart? Xie Lanshan thought about it for a moment before he shook his head and mumbled to himself, "But... it's too painful..."

He looked at the man in front of him with a cowardly, muddled gaze as he fixed his eyes on this familiar yet strange part of himself. A tear rolled down Xie Lanshan's face. He really didn't understand and was desperate for an answer, so he asked, "Don't you think it's too much... nobody remembers what you've done, even your sacrifice was taken for granted. You continue walking down a solitary path with such a heavy burden on your shoulders, but you can't complain or find someone who could understand you... it's too painful to be a good person... it's too much..."

The man gave him a smile and said, "But isn't this our fate?"

Xie Lanshan frowned and looked at the cop before him, puzzled.

"From the moment we are born from our mother's womb until we return to the earth, this is how life is from start to finish. Alone, helplessness, misunderstood, indecisive... all the mortal lives intertwined on this earth share a similar experience." Xie Lanshan saw the gentle smile on the other man's face and a hand reached out to him. The man said, "I chose to live this unique way of life myself, as a way to honor and respect the concept of life itself."

A ray of light flashed in the midst of chaos and darkness. All the memories from this drug enforcement officer reappeared more clearly in his mind. Xie Lanshan also reached out a hand and attempted to touch these visions.

We are all born alone until we overcome solitude.

We are all born with egos until we overcome our own limits.

We see through the purest evil in humanity until we overcome the abyss of darkness and share benevolence with the world around us.

Without me, there would be no you.

Xie Lanshan closed his eyes and could almost feel the warmth on his hand.

And then he heard a voice. A familiar voice called him by his name, "Xie Lanshan!"

It was Shen Liufei's voice.

He opened his eyes in the dark like two revitalized sparks of fire glowing more fiercely by the second.

Shen Liufei rushed over with Zang Yifeng's guidance. He wanted to knock on every door to search, but grew more anxious until he finally gave up and began crying out the man's name.

Xie Lanshan heard his voice and walked out the door to greet the man that came for him.

Zang Yifeng stood still before his enemy and removed the friendly façade. He stared coldly at Xie Lanshan and said clearly, "I'm Zhuo Tian's boyfriend."

"I remember her." Xie Lanshan nodded and didn't explain further. He took a step toward Zang Yifeng and knelt before the man.

Both standing men were shocked. This sudden action meant the man admitted to who he was. Rage filled Zang Yifeng as he lifted a leg and stomped violently on Xie Lanshan's injured shoulder. Fresh blood once again stained his shirt as the wound reopened.

Despite the pain, Xie Lanshan didn't cry out at this violent gesture and crawled back up, once again kneeling before the man.

"I'm gonna kill you! I'm gonna kill you! How dare you treat her that way! If it wasn't for you, she wouldn't have died!" Zang Yifeng had intended to kill this man from the start so he wouldn't let go of this opportunity to avenge his girlfriend. He kicked Xie Lanshan once again and then stepped heavily on the man's stomach after Xie Lanshan fell to the ground multiple times.

Xie Lanshan vomited bile and crawled up once again. Out of a guilty conscience and a need to repent, he never returned a punch and allowed Zang Yifeng to beat him over and over.

Hatred fueled every punch and every kick, but Xie Lanshan didn't feel pain. Instead, he felt relief.

Shen Liufei still had mixed feelings about this man. He stood silently on the side and watched the beating. He watched as Xie Lanshan was punched down, then crawled back up again and again to the same kneeling position. He watched as blood trickled down the corner of Xie Lanshan's lips, leaving a trail of crimson on his skin.

Those shared memories he had with his man reappeared in his mind.

Beneath Shen Liufei's dark eyes, sparks of fire melted through the coldness and shone through the silk screen of memories. Finally, those forgotten emotions were rediscovered, and the fog dispersed.

"I'm gonna kill you! I'm gonna—"

"That's enough." Xie Lanshan was still kneeling on the ground when he suddenly clapped his hands together, catching Zang Yifeng's fist in his hands. He slowly lifted his head and gave the man a playful smile behind his disheveled look. "Keep your hands off the face. Don't you feel bad for trying to attack my handsome face?"

Shen Liufei's lips curled up at this scene; he knew that, along with his own memories, his Xie Lanshan had also returned.

Xie Lanshan's mind was clear and awake at this moment. He turned and pushed Zang Yifeng down to the ground. Before the man could get up, he leaned down and stared the man in the eye, promising sincerely, "Stop the beating for now, put it on my tab. I promise I'll repay you after I finish my job."

This gaze differed completely from the first time Zang Yifeng had met the man; it was clear, bright, and confident. Zang Yifeng was startled and nodded without

thinking.

Xie Lanshan pulled himself up after letting the man go. He wiped off the blood from his chin and then wobbled toward Shen Liufei.

He leaned his forehead onto the man's shoulder and called out gently, "Hey, cuz."

Shen Liufei lifted a hand and placed it on Xie Lanshan's back, then pulled the man into a full embrace.

This powerful but warm embrace finally calmed his heart. Xie Lanshan closed his eyes and repeated softly, "I want to be a good person..."

I want to be a good person.

Homecoming

Xie Lanshan returned to the Golden Triangle on a spring night of light rain.

The once blooming opium fields had vanished like the place had completely transformed. After Mu Kun's group was annihilated, the governments around the Golden Triangle set strict policies banning the growth of opium flowers. Among the countries involved, Laos was the first to invest in recreation. The Laotian government stationed national guards around the area and began implementing new policies to replace narcotics with more economic agriculture.

Despite their efforts, the Golden Triangle was still the largest source of illegal drugs in the world. Many locals suffered from addiction as traditional and new drugs continued to grow in the market. The underground ice labs below the Mekong River were powerful factories, and the dying heroin market could also easily revitalize if precautions were not taken. As the neighboring province in China, Hanhai was an important checkpoint in intercepting the international drug trade.

The Jinlong Mountains were like a fearsome dragon resting beneath the dusky sun, and the Mekong River shimmered red like blood. The banana forests beneath stretched past the horizon while the kapok trees stood tall against them. Xie Lanshan stared for a long time at the scene and closed his eyes, feeling his heart beat heavily as his senses were stimulated.

Six years of being undercover passed like a horrific dream.

Xie Lanshan knew where Mu Kun and his men liked to hang out in the Golden Triangle. He had seen some familiar faces when he was captured by Mu Kun, and perhaps out of his own bias, every face was unforgettable and damned.

After a few days of investigation, Xie Lanshan successfully tracked down one person. He tailed the man carefully until he went into an isolated location, then forced the man down and shoved him against a wall.

Xie Lanshan handed the drug dealer a USB drive and told him to bring it back to Mu Kun. He said, "He will reward you handsomely if you do as I say, but if you don't give it to him, I will chase you down across the globe until you're dead."

Mu Kun soon received the USB drive that contained a short video. The video was filmed in an entire room full of red ice with his beloved Xie Lanshan on camera.

There was one pack of red ice beside Xie Lanshan. In the video, he took out some of that beautiful crystal-like substance and slowly ground it into powder between his fingers. The sprinkle of purple powder fell almost artfully.

A small portion of the drugs was bought off the market, but most of it was fake, made by Zang Yifeng—though Mu Kun couldn't possibly tell the difference from just a video. Xie Lanshan smiled alluringly in the video and said, "I'm still a member of the Blue Fox to the end. I know my teammates better than you. So, sorry, but all the red ice that Chi Jin stole from you is in my hands now."

That damned bastard! Mu Kun cursed in his mind; he had searched everywhere the kid could have hidden the goods but couldn't find anything.

"These goods are worth at least seven billion to you, but for someone who has no intention of selling drugs, they're completely worthless to me. So I'm going to ask you to give me some money. Those damned cops are still after me, so I need to get out of the country."

In order to lure Mu Kun in, Xie Lanshan had kept his arrest warrant up.

At the end of the video, Xie Lanshan gave the drug lord a satellite phone number and then a smile, saying, "You know how to find me."

Chi Jin's grenade may not have killed Mu Kun, but it did gravely wound him. Just before the explosion, Mu Kun had grabbed a lackey to use as a shield, but it wasn't enough to spare him from some injuries. Aside from severe burns and scratches on his left arm, he also had a serious avulsion on the same side. He'd gone through three surgeries back-to-back after returning to Myanmar.

Mu Kun's bandages were being changed when he called Xie Lanshan through the number; the doctor was cleaning his wounds with iodine and preparing to rewrap it with clean bandages.

The sharp pain during this process made cold sweat roll down his face. Mu Kun leaned against the soft tatami mat and waited for Xie Lanshan to pick up the video call. Almost as soon as Xie Lanshan's face appeared when the call went through, his eyes beamed. He almost forgot about his injury and struggled to sit up.

Unlike his playful look in the recorded video, Xie Lanshan had cut his hair short and exposed his clean features; harsh bruises were visible on his face. He sat on the ground before the camera, one hand holding a sculpting knife and another holding a half-finished wooden elephant. Beside his feet were woodchips of varying sizes. His expression was calm and tranquil, reserved and quiet, like a peaceful body of water.

This man who had been undercover for years beside the drug lord had worked harder than anyone else and suffered more injuries than any of his men. Mu Kun still remembered that Xie Lanshan would always sit in the corner with small wounds all over his body, quietly sculpting a piece of wood in his hand.

For a moment, Mu Kun felt as if he was in a dream, as if the a-Lan he once knew had returned.

Xie Lanshan saw the injuries on Mu Kun's exposed upper body. The sharp cuts were still untreated, and blood was still visible through the white bandages.

"I remember you were also injured that time you were ambushed by Guan Nuoqin's men." Xie Lanshan recalled a strange time and said calmly, "It was in a

forest near the borders of Thailand and Myanmar. I told you back then that I would get you out of there.”

The drizzle over the last few days had finally stopped, but the weather remained foggy and moist for the sprouting greens. A gust of wind shook the raindrops all over the floor, making the place look even more like a rainforest from a fairy tale. The stony expression on Xie Lanshan’s face brought all the memories back. Mu Kun remembered how Xie Lanshan sucked out the poison from his leg and how this young man had carried him out of the forest on that same rainy night.

He half-jokingly said that he wanted to tattoo his name on Xie Lanshan, but the man had shaken his head and finally responded by promising earnestly that they would forever be brothers.

The rush of memories only made Mu Kun feel agonized and dazed—even more so than the physical pain he felt in his body. He covered his face in his hands and begged through his lips, “Stop pretending to be him, you’re not him... you’re not him...”

Xie Lanshan stared at him pitifully and silently for a few moments, then suddenly chuckled. At that moment, his expression changed; his gaze was aloof and cocky. He tossed the little wooden elephant in his hand aside and pressed the back of the knife’s blade against his red lips, then smiled. “All right, let’s talk business.”

The man shifted smoothly between two vastly different states. Mu Kun’s mind was still foggy from his injury and he almost couldn’t tell if this man on the call was a drug enforcement officer or a wanted murderer.

“Seven billion worth of red ice; I only want one billion worth of diamonds from you. I think it’s a pretty fair trade.” Xie Lanshan shifted the camera angle and gestured toward the helicopter outside of his hideout. He then moved the camera back and said, “I rented out a helicopter with some of your red ice. Once you give me the money and I hand off the goods, I’ll leave this place and never show up before you as Xie Lanshan again.”

“How are you so sure that I can pay out one billion worth of diamonds right now?” The doctor pressed a little harder while changing his bandages. Mu Kun gritted his teeth and glared at the man, then turned back and snarled at Xie Lanshan. “Besides, what makes you think I’ll agree to this trade?”

“Diamonds are a girl’s best friend,” Xie Lanshan said pretentiously and lifted an eyebrow. He then laughed and said, “Didn’t you say I’m the queen of your dreams? What’s wrong with winning the affection of your queen with some diamonds?”

The smile vanished almost instantly as soon as he finished the line. He held up a hand at the camera and then said sternly, “We’re brothers who have been through life and death together.”

When Xie Lanshan entered the state of a drug enforcement officer, everything from his demeanor down to the tone of his voice seemed to have transformed. His stiff and stern look was strangely enticing to Mu Kun. The drug lord was enchanted by this image and said, almost without thought, “Why do you even need to escape overseas

when you can come back to my side?”

The passion from this man was almost laughable and pitiful. Xie Lanshan once again pulled himself out of this stern state and said cockily, “I’ll decide the place we meet, you decide the time. Just to be fair.”

They set the location: the third military zone near the border of Laos. The Laotian government had established a special Golden Triangle economic zone and specifically stationed a group of militia in the area, supervised by a Laotian colonel named Xayachack.

Guan Nuoqin was able to overtake Mu Kun’s territories within a short time because he had connections with government officials in all countries surrounding the Golden Triangle. The investigation behind Kang Tai also dragged out some dirt from high-ranking officials. Most of them in Thailand had already lost power, and rumors had it that Xayachack was a double agent for the drug lords in Laos.

Mu Kun couldn’t possibly buy the Laotian off in such a short time frame, and because he often worked with drug traders, there was hostility between Xayachack and the Chinese forces.

Mu Kun would therefore not dare to act too rashly in this theoretical neutral zone. The Chinese forces also had no jurisdiction over this piece of land, making it a safe space for both sides.

“If you’re scared, you don’t even need to show up yourself. Just send your men in with the diamonds.” Before hanging up the call, Xie Lanshan said without gravitas:

“I’m the cop, you’re the bandit.”

Tang Qinglan, who had been waiting outside, walked into the room holding the hand of a young girl who looked to be only seven or eight years old. She was Guan Nuoqin’s granddaughter, Naga. She was a pretty girl with a round face, big eyes with long lashes, and soft natural curls. Mu Kun was raising her in order to keep Guan Nuoqin’s old subordinates under control.

Tang Qinglan knew what the man was thinking, seeing him ponder silently in the room. She took the little girl out to play. Before she left, she warned, “Xie Lanshan clearly has an ulterior motive for proposing this trade. I don’t trust him.”

His bandages were fully rewrapped with new ointment, but Mu Kun’s muscles still twitched in pain. The glare in his eyes was flickering like a ray of cold moonlight in the black night.

“We heard from Liu Mingfang’s dad through the bug on his cell phone. The Blue Fox captain, Sui Hong, is in Myanmar right now. It’s clear that they’re trying to lure you out with Xie Lanshan and this one ton of red ice.” Tang Qinglan grew anxious after receiving no response from the man. Her pretty face twisted as she said, “Has that little mutt from the Blue Fox not caused you enough trouble that you’re willing to risk your life again?”

“Come here,” Mu Kun finally spoke after panting heavily, his voice deeper than normal.

“Don’t try to swallow what you can’t digest. Are you saying that the red ice is more important than our business and your life?”

She walked toward the man on the tatami, only to see he was enraged. He picked up medical scissors the doctor hadn’t taken away from the side and lashed out.

Tang Qinglan couldn’t react in time; a deep cut sliced down her face.

She screamed and attempted to run, but the man quickly pulled on her hair.

“You fool, do you really think I care about that seven billion in red ice?” An injured beast was the epitome of madness. Mu Kun pulled Tang Qinglan toward him, leaned in, and growled into her ear, “The only thing I want is Xie Lanshan.”

A subordinate opened the door during the conversation and Mu Kun finally let the woman go. He closed his eyes lazily and said, “If it’s not something I want to hear, then don’t say it or I’ll kill you.”

The report was exactly what he wanted to hear.

After listening in to Liu Yanbo’s cell phone, he learned that Captain Sui Hong had secretly arrived in Myanmar. However, the man didn’t rush to carry out a mission and instead went to a small town east of the country called Mongton.

Mu Kun sent out massive forces to search for Sui Hong’s whereabouts in Mongton and finally discovered that the man visited a small temple in the village every year.

Myanmar was a Buddhist country with countless temples across the land. This temple was on the top of a small mountain, which made it quite deserted. It was dusty and old, as if worshippers never came to pay respects.

Aside from some old monks who still lived there, the broken temple was a lone tower that stood silently for centuries facing northward.

It was unlikely that a drug enforcement unit captain would be a religious man, and even if he was, he wouldn’t secretly visit this insignificant temple in the middle of nowhere. Mu Kun thus guessed that his a-Lan was buried there.

(ii)

Xie Lanshan suggested a few locations to meet up within the military zone, and Mu Kun happily accepted to meet at a small bar.

Members of the Blue Fox were already positioned around the establishment. Xie Lanshan’s plan was carefully calculated. The first step was to make sure Mu Kun showed up and let either snipers or the Blue Fox take him down by force.

Xie Lanshan was certain that Mu Kun would come personally to the meeting; the man would never give up his twisted obsession with the young cop.

Mu Kun arrived on time with three bullet-proof cars in front of the bar. A little girl with curled hair jumped out as soon as the door opened, followed by Mu Kun, who then held her up above his shoulder.

Armed drug dealers also stepped out of the three cars outside and guarded the front door of the bar, while others stayed in the car as if they had other plans. Mu Kun

carried the girl into the bar with a loving smile.

He had his reason for choosing this location.

There weren't many places for snipers to hide during the daytime. In addition, the environment made it difficult to find good angles to aim. As expected, the Blue Fox lost their opportunity to snipe and barge in with force. This drug lord was cruel and sly, allowing a seven-year-old girl to be his hostage and shield.

The bar was still open to the public to hide from the eyes of the authorities. A few young men sat and drank at the bar table while a singer serenaded the patrons with her deep voice.

Xie Lanshan arrived earlier than Mu Kun and sat beside the window. He didn't roll up his sleeves or unbutton his white-collared shirt. He'd even tucked his shirt tails into his black pants conservatively. The shimmering sunlight showered on his profile through the window. He was deep in thought; his whole figure emitted a sense of purity and cleanliness.

Mu Kun stared carefully at Xie Lanshan for a while before placing the little girl on his shoulder down. He walked over and sat before Xie Lanshan, who looked up, saw the little girl beside Mu Kun, and frowned.

The girl was more reliable than a bulletproof vest, and Mu Kun knew that very well. He gestured for Naga to stand by the window and said gently, "Be a good girl and sing a song for me here, okay?"

The girl did not know her grandfather had died due to this man's evil conspiracies, so she treated him like her real uncle. She gave a sweet smile, stood beside the window, and began singing.

Mu Kun clapped for her with a smile while her clear vocals rang inside the bar. The drug lord also seemed to enjoy playing the role of a good uncle. Mu Kun counted the beats for her as he watched the girl but said to Xie Lanshan, "Let me search you. I don't think you would want this little girl to become an innocent sacrifice."

Xie Lanshan let out a small sigh, stood up, and held out his arms in front of Mu Kun.

"Turn around."

Xie Lanshan obeyed the order under the curious gazes of a few customers inside the bar.

Mu Kun walked behind Xie Lanshan and began searching carefully.

Against the thin fabric, his fingers traced down Xie Lanshan's fit body from his shoulder, underarm, even down to his thin waist. Mu Kun knelt to check if there were guns hidden beneath Xie Lanshan's pants, his face practically glued onto Xie Lanshan's buttocks.

He couldn't stop himself from lusting for this body. He attempted to find traces of the other person's existence on this man. From the gaze, movements, even down to the tone of voice and smell, every similarity he could find enticed him but also pained him.

Soon, Mu Kun found a listening device and a small hand grenade—identical to the one that Chi Jin had before.

“Do you Chinese people all enjoy suicide bombing or something?” Mu Kun laughed as he tossed the two items on the table. The few young men at the bar saw the items and ran out, screaming.

Only the little girl by the window who didn’t recognize these items continued singing and asked Mu Kun with a grin, “Do you like my song, Uncle?”

“I do. Sing another one for your uncle.” Mu Kun grinned back at her and then turned to Xie Lanshan in anger. “They’ve used you, wronged you, and even harmed you. Why are you still willing to die for them?!”

“I’m not doing it for them. I just want you dead.” Xie Lanshan sat back down and responded calmly, even after being exposed, “I’ve said it already, I’m the cop and you’re the bandit.”

Mu Kun was almost shaken up by the familiar stern demeanor of Xie Lanshan. The next moment, he clapped and laughed. “Good, a lesson learned today.”

His eyes fell outside of the window as he said, “These cars outside are all filled with explosives. If you dare do anything fishy or attempt to take me down with you, the area within a radius of a few hundred meters will be reduced to ashes. You, me, and everyone else will be crushed in an instant.” The man was insane. He lowered his head and spoke into the listening device on the table with reddened eyes. “Captain Sui, I don’t know what your government did to pressure Laos to allow special forces like your team to arrest someone in their territory, but I know that the rest of the Blue Foxes are here and waiting outside the door. Do you want them to die too?”

Sui Hong’s expression darkened outside the bar. He glanced at his teammates and gestured for them to back off.

Soon after, Mu Kun began ranting about the Cuban missile crisis at Xie Lanshan. He rambled about how Kennedy and Khrushchev’s battle was to prove who was the maddest man on earth, and who was willing to be the cruelest dominator. He said that the crisis almost a century ago mirrored the turbulent situation today. Even if he dared to blow up the entire military zone in Laos, that would mean he was digging his grave to let the military crush his organization.

“You sure are crazy.” Xie Lanshan’s eyes widened for an instant, but he quickly regained his posture and sneered.

“Just some occasional madness for you... no, not you...” Mu Kun corrected himself and said with a pained expression, “Not for you, for my a-Lan.”

Mu Kun took a bottle of wine from the table and crushed the listening device with a heavy slam.

A sharp noise came out of the officers’ earphones. Sui Hong, who was drifting back toward a safe zone, could no longer listen in on the conversation inside the bar.

Mu Kun looked at Xie Lanshan and said coldly, “There must be another tracking device on you. Take it out.”

Xie Lanshan rolled up his left sleeve, grabbed a knife on the table, and sliced his arm to pull out a small GPS chip from beneath his skin.

“Do you know why I agreed to meet here?” Mu Kun looked quite pleased as he pointed at and forced Xie Lanshan to stand. He then took out a rope and tied Xie Lanshan’s hands behind his back. He shoved the man to walk in a certain direction and said, “War exists alongside the people living in the Golden Triangle. All bars and clubs here are connected to each other through underground passages.”

They left the little girl in the bar and walked down into a tunnel, then got into a car that was parked and waiting underground.

“Where are we going?” Xie Lanshan frowned and asked as he got into the passenger seat, then laughed. He licked the corner of his lips and brushed his tongue across his white teeth, saying, “Just you and me, not too bad of a scenario.”

The difference between this man and his a-Lan was only millimeters away, but this comment completely set them apart. Unamused by this flirtatious attitude, Mu Kun knocked Xie Lanshan unconscious with a heavy punch as his eyes dimmed.

Mu Kun turned on the engine as he glanced at the unconscious man on the side and drove out before the Blue Fox could chase them down.

He whispered to the man beside him gently, “Don’t you want to know where you’re buried?”

It was around a four-hour drive to the temple. Xie Lanshan fell into a short dream; it was a time before this mission when Shen Liufei told him that he was no longer alone, that he mustn’t think about taking Mu Kun down in exchange for his life.

Shen Liufei repeated this multiple times, and it was true that Xie Lanshan had once thought about doing so before his lover had scolded him about it.

He confirmed with Peng Huaili that old Xie was the Apostle. Though, it didn’t matter who it was now; at this very moment, he had never been firmer in his belief to be a good man, a good cop—but not for anyone else.

Heatwaves crashed down rapidly as if to chase away the lingering wintry weather, resulting in an endless downpour of rain. That night, the two men’s bodies were glued together on the bed, dancing to the sound of rain outside the window. They kissed and had sex, exchanging the fluids inside each other and breathing each other’s air.

Luring Mu Kun to the place Xie Lanshan’s ashes were buried was actually Shen Liufei’s idea. After their reunion, Xie Lanshan recounted the days he had been confined by Mu Kun and mentioned the drug lord had wanted to find Xie Lanshan’s grave—and end his life there.

It was indeed a ridiculous plot that even Xie Lanshan wasn’t sure would work. He moaned and asked Shen Liufei, “Why are you so sure that he would drop everything to find Xie... to find me?”

“Why wouldn’t he?” Shen Liufei was still inside Xie Lanshan when he responded. He slowed the thrusting, switching from a violent invasion to a more gentle, rhythmic motion. The artist gently kissed his lover’s eyelids, nose, and lips as he responded,

“Those days where I almost forgot you made me realize something. Anyone who falls in love with you will yearn for you instinctively, like we yearn for light.”

Xie Lanshan woke. Assuming that he would be put into this situation, he had prepared a small knife hidden in his cuff that Mu Kun wouldn't notice. Still pretending to be asleep, he carefully took the knife out and began cutting through the rope.

He felt the car stop as he was cutting. A dark shadow loomed over him and stopped close to his face. The figure was so close that Xie Lanshan could hear breathing, which slowly grew heavier. As seconds passed, he felt like he was in immense agony.

Mu Kun stared long and hard at Xie Lanshan. Love and loathing filled his face, but just as he was on the brink of suppressing his emotions, Mu Kun slapped Xie Lanshan awake.

Xie Lanshan opened his eyes and feigned drowsiness, staring back at Mu Kun in silence. He saw some moisture in the drug lord's eyes, like the man had just shed a few sincere tears moments earlier.

Yet Mu Kun's expression and voice chilled as soon as Xie Lanshan woke. He announced, “We're here.”

(iii)

Amidst the web of truth and lies, every step in the scheme leading up to the small temple on the mountaintop had advanced just as Xie Lanshan and Shen Liufei planned.

Yet neither of them could have expected that Mu Kun would send his men to guard the temple and even dig up Xie Lanshan's ashes from the side of the tower.

Xie Lanshan's expression changed slightly as he realized the danger of this situation. Aside from Mu Kun, there were another dozen or so drug dealers fully armed with weapons. Some guarded from outside the temple while others were stationed inside. Perhaps at Mu Kun's orders, they were forced to chant mantras with the monks in the temple to send off Officer Xie's soul properly.

After four hours of driving, the sky became gray. Xie Lanshan could see the plain but clean structure of the sacred temple through the dim light. A row of red candlelight swayed in the breeze, and that blue and white urn rested quietly within this circle.

Four Blue Fox members who had shaved their heads and donned the crimson monk robes sat quietly with their heads bowed, suppressing the rage within them and the temptation to pull their guns from beneath their robes. They continued to chant with the masters of the temple as they waited for an opportunity to strike.

“You're about to die here. Any final words?” Mu Kun held up a gun against Xie Lanshan's head and forced him to walk toward the empty ground before the temple gate.

“You said you want me to die before Officer Xie’s grave, can’t you at least show me where he’s buried?” Xie Lanshan attempted to bargain with Mu Kun, but he knew it was in vain. If the urn was already dug up, the gun hidden beside the tower must have already been taken away by Mu Kun’s men as well.

That was originally his backup plan, but it didn’t seem like it would work now.

“There’s no need anymore.” As expected, Mu Kun pointed his gun toward Xie Lanshan on the empty field, past the group of monks still chanting on the ground. “You disgusting mutt. You don’t deserve to live on with a-Lan’s identity—I’ll send you to hell in front of him right now.”

The monks all witnessed this scene and the chanting paused for a second. Mu Kun immediately hollered, “Don’t stop! Keep chanting, louder!”

“What are you talking about? I’m a-Lan...” The chanting continued rhythmically by his ears. Xie Lanshan’s hands were still tied as he faced Mu Kun’s gun and carefully took steps back.

The small blade sewn into his sleeves was close to cutting through the rope, but the situation was still dire.

There were a dozen drug dealers at the location and only four special agents disguised as monks. The difference in manpower wasn’t the problem, but the fact that almost half of the drug dealers carried submachine guns was worrisome. Sui Hong had already set up plans to send out helicopter backup at any moment, but they still needed to take down Mu Kun first and take control of the situation or they would risk the lives of all the monks in the temple.

Xie Lanshan’s face grew pale and he bit down on his lip. He wasn’t fearful, he simply hated his uselessness and that he allowed himself to be prey in the hand of a predator. Despite promising Shen Liufei that he would take care of himself and not die with Mu Kun, he refused to let this chance be in vain under the man’s gun.

“You aren’t, stop trying to pretend you are!” Mu Kun’s gun was pointed at Xie Lanshan as he glared with malice. “I remember I told you that I would kill you in front of a-Lan...”

Xie Lanshan’s sweat rolled down his face as Mu Kun’s finger was about to pull on the trigger. His throat rolled unnaturally at the comment. If he hadn’t forgotten what Mu Kun said, he would have planned everything differently and not allowed the man to bring him over here.

But alas, no plan was perfect, and he was one step behind.

The instant before the trigger was pulled, a little Sami stood up amongst the monks in red. He called out toward Mu Kun, “Wait.”

The Sami wasn’t that tall, but his face was clean and elegant, and he looked to be about thirteen or fourteen years old. He faced the gunpoint fearlessly and said to Mu Kun with his palms together, “There’s an old saying in Chinese that said ‘the sinner who has wronged the heavens shall be beheaded.’ And another that ‘the gravest sins cannot be liberated by prayers.’ These two sayings prove that all prayers and

transcendence rituals for the dead who saw their ends in foreign land will never reach the heavens. And even if they do reach the afterlife, it could affect their fortune in the land of gods.”

Xie Lanshan was in a foreign land right now; his body had been buried for years, but his soul and memories continued to live on in another body. Mu Kun was angered. “How dare you curse him, monk!”

The Sami sighed and shook his head. “Sending off the soul is to allow the dead a peaceful afterlife after agony, and also a way for us to cultivate and practice goodness. I cannot and will not persuade you to not kill a person, so instead, I will vow to carry this urn at the end of this man’s life. Borrowing Buddha’s powers, I will help return the body to where it belongs so that the dead can escape the torturous cycle and return to reincarnation.”

Mu Kun’s expression was wistful. Chanting, transcendence, and vows—everything he had done was for his a-Lan; his grief was sincere and genuine. His lips trembled as he said, “Bring a-Lan... bring his urn over here, to me.”

The Sami held up the urn, stepped out of the temple, and walked slowly toward the two men.

The lights were dim inside the temple, and Xie Lanshan only saw clearly under the sunlight that the urn wasn’t made of fanciful white marble or sandalwood, nor did it have any intricate carvings.

It was a plain and basic ceramic urn, with blue and white pottery designs of cleanly painted mountains and rivers on the exterior.

A few steps away from Mu Kun, the Sami suddenly tossed the ceramic urn toward Xie Lanshan.

Within an instant, the urn shattered beside Xie Lanshan’s foot. Beneath the white ashes was the gun he had hidden beside the tower.

While Xie Lanshan broke out of the rope to grab the gun from the ground, Mu Kun cried out loud, “A-Lan!”

The drug lord didn’t even notice the gun and only saw his a-Lan shattered on the ground about to be blown away by the winds on the mountaintop.

“Ah! A-Lan!” Mu Kun snapped and turned his gun toward the Sami, firing a few rounds without even aiming.

Fresh blood splattered as the bullets pierced through his body. The Sami fell to the ground with a smile.

Xie Lanshan grabbed the gun at this moment, narrowed his eyes, and aimed at Mu Kun’s head. The next moment, he pulled the trigger.

At almost the same time, Mu Kun twisted his head and also fired back.

Both men dropped to the ground after being shot; the bullet pierced through Mu Kun’s head while Xie Lanshan was shot on the right side in his chest. The four Blue Fox members in disguise got up amidst the chaos and quickly took down two drug dealers holding submachine guns.

Every member was a brave soul; some still stood up after taking two bullets to brawl with the drug dealers.

The Sami was on his last breath; his limbs twitched in pain. Xie Lanshan, who was still on the ground, stared at him. He wasn't sure why the child had decided to do this.

The large robe pressed onto the Sami's body, exposing some feminine curves. The Sami reached a bloody hand out toward Xie Lanshan. Her hands trembled like a withering flower as she moved her lips, coughing out blood as she said, "Do you... remember me..."

Unlike the clear and calm voice earlier, this weak and gentle sound was that of a little girl.

Xie Lanshan attempted to recall where he'd seen this Sami as blood dribbled from his injury. He tried to crawl up but fell back down due to lack of energy. He thought she was familiar.

"Are you..." Xie Lanshan traced his memories and finally found the source of this familiarity. His eyes widened in surprise and disbelief as he said, "You're... Annie?"

"Annie's my sister..." The girl blinked, tears rolled down her eyes as she smiled. "I'm the little girl you saved from the brothel."

Xie Lanshan could never forget that beautiful and brave woman. He almost exposed himself from saving the brothel full of children and she gave her life to protect his comrade in return.

He also remembered the nine-year-old girl from that time. A high-ranking government official had violently abused her in the brothel in Myanmar. The official was over fifty, portly, and ugly. Just as she was drowning in despair, it was almost as if the heavens heard her prayers when she saw the man arrive. He shot down that heavy man who was pressing down her small body with a single shot. He then took off his jacket, knelt before her, and gently wrapped her naked and wounded body with it. The warmth was real, as if he was wrapping homemade dumplings during a family gathering.

He burned down that damned place. He took her and all the girls who shared the same tragic fate as her out of the endless abyss into a new life.

Her sister Annie was too deep in the drug trade and could no longer act on her own; since the little girl had nowhere to go once she escaped, she hid herself in this temple. Never could she have imagined she would meet that man's captain in a place like this. She eavesdropped on the conversation between the captain and the master and learned that the man who saved her was a Chinese drug enforcement officer named Xie Lanshan. Then, the evil drug traders knocked on their temple door. In order to prepare for the worst, she silently hid that gun she'd found in Xie Lanshan's urn.

The girl would never forget how this handsome man named Xie Lanshan warmly saved her from that torturous life.

“Sis...” She was willing to give her life for this man, just like her sister. She closed her eyes with a smile and said, “He really is... a kind person...”

The backup helicopter arrived almost as soon as the battle broke out. The propellers raised a gust like a sandstorm, like the sharpest, warmest gale of spring.

This gust of wind carried the ashes of a hero into the air, higher and higher, farther and farther away.

Xie Lanshan’s injury was still bleeding. He was too exhausted to move. He could only watch as snow-white ashes floated into the air. This was a peculiar feeling; it was like seeing a part of himself ride the wind and fly to the horizon.

He refused to stay for the blossoming flowers, the sky-soaring mountains, or the streaming rivers. He returned with the winds, flying northward, northward; past the 4,060 kilometers of the international borders, until he reached the beautiful Xishuangbana prefecture. Farther in was Hanhai City, where he had been born and raised—and the vast country of China he had served.

Because of the unique geographical location, the Chinese drug market was the most rampant in Hanhai. Ever since the formation of the first antidrug force, over two thousand tons of illegal drugs had been blocked outside of the country. Dozens of police officers were sacrificed for the efforts, and hundreds were severely injured.

Shen Liufei came, Sui Hong came; many people came. They all looked up and watched the gale travel farther away.

Xie Lanshan smiled as he watched the earth from above. This was the land he’d protected with his blood and sweat, this was the peace he had loyally sworn to watch over for the rest of his life.

He was finally home.

Finale

“I hereby swear to become a police officer of the People’s Republic of China, to give myself to the honorable career of protecting the civilians of my country. I pledge my allegiance to the government, to serve the people, abide by the law, and uphold discipline...”

In the warmth of spring, the Hanhai City Municipal Bureau welcomed twenty new officers into their department. Traditionally, every officer gave their pledges on the first day of the job, but as the municipal bureau was heading the troubling antidrug efforts throughout the whole province, they had temporarily held off the requirement.

The Golden Triangle finally settled after they cleaned up the storm left by Mu Kun and his remaining forces. That was when the municipal bureau remembered that they still needed to host the orientation for newcomers. After delegating tasks to the appropriate departments, the branch chief asked human resources to arrange a tour for the municipal bureau’s new recruits. The plan also included an orientation for pledges which would be open to both veteran and new officers.

June was the beginning of summer, the sky was exceptionally clear. In the martyr’s hall inside the public security’s education department, a staff member was summarizing the most heroic deeds in the history of Hanhai City’s antidrug operations. The veteran officers were all standing in their navy blue uniforms in a straight row listening to the speech with grave expressions on their faces.

Even the leaders from the Provincial Department of Public Security showed up. The person who escorted the guests in these events was no longer Liu Yanbo. Since discovering his son had installed a listening app on his phone, he’d cooperated with Sui Hong in setting up the trap to lure Mu Kun in. After Mu Kun was shot dead and Tang Qinglan was arrested, he personally reported Liu Mingfang to the public security department. After this heartless cut-off between the father and son, he grew tired of staying in Hanhai and found an excuse to be transferred to another city.

The representative from the bureau was now Tao Jun. Director Peng scanned the row of cops standing in the hall and then leaned in toward Tao Jun, asking, “Where’s Xie Lanshan?”

Tao Jun followed Peng Huaili’s gaze and noticed that the little rascal evidently hadn’t shown up.

After greeting the senior officers, Tao Jun walked toward Tao Longyue. Unable to scold Xie Lanshan in person, he had no choice but to unleash his anger on his son and asked, “Where’s Xie Lanshan? Didn’t you call him?”

Tao Longyue explained, "I told him, but he..."

Tao Jun's expression darkened. "He what?"

Seeing the old man's face grow darker, Tao Longyue could only confess, "He said he'll come if he feels like it."

"If he feels like it? He just got promoted to vice captain, how can he still act so undisciplined?" Tao Jun roared in anger at his son, "Give me your phone, I'll give him a call!"

"Hey, ol' Tao, didn't I tell you I'll come if I feel—"

"Feel what? Feel like my ass!" Tao Jun was ready to reach through the phone and drag this rascal over to the orientation as soon as he heard Xie Lanshan's voice. He held the phone and howled, "Get over here right now!"

"My... my wound reopened..." The energetic voice earlier disappeared as Xie Lanshan put on an act and weakly explained to Tao Jun, "I wanted to show up, but I can't..."

Xie Lanshan was on his last breath the day they carried him up to the helicopter from the mountaintop. He was in critical condition for seven whole days before he was finally in the clear.

This time, he didn't spill blood in vain and earned himself another second-class merit, allowing him to be promoted to the rank of vice captain in the homicide and violent crime unit as soon as he returned.

"Stop acting in front of me. I'm warning you now, hurry over—"

"I think the signal's bad here. Ah, my head hurts, can't see, it's morning sickness... I'll hang up now."

"Xie Lanshan? Xie Lanshan, how dare you hang up! You—"

"Hello... Wow, what's with this signal? Hello?" Xie Lanshan called out a few more times to fake a poor signal and then hung up the phone. He let out a breath of air and turned off his phone in case of more unwanted harassment.

He had just gotten off the airplane and was sitting on a bus, heading toward a southern town called Guitang with Shen Liufei.

"Already a disciplinary warning just when you got promoted," Shen Liufei commented. "That's not good."

"Hey, cuz, don't you know how boring those stupid patriotic orientations are?"

Shen Liufei wasn't a cop, so of course he'd never had to sit through one, but Xie Lanshan couldn't stand a second of that. He pulled out a canned beer from the backpack and leaned back on the seat with a grin. "It's one thing to listen to those old men giving speeches and telling stories, but everyone has to sing that stale national anthem. I swear it's the most boring thing in the world."

The bus drove straight down the uneven roads. Xie Lanshan was ready to open the can of beer when Shen Liufei reached an arm over and took it from him.

Shen Liufei carefully tapped the bottom of the can with his fingers to reduce the carbon dioxide in the beer and stop it from fizzing upon opening.

It was a simple trick that even Xie Lanshan knew, but of course, he was too lazy to do it himself. He stared at Shen Liufei with a warm look and full heart, thinking: *My cuz really is handsome and kind.*

Shen Liufei pulled on the tab and opened the can, then handed it back to Xie Lanshan.

“Thank—”

Before the “s” sound could drop, Xie Lanshan saw the man pull his arm back and take a sip of the beer as if to tease him.

As the taste of barley rolled down his throat, Shen Liufei said coolly, “You can’t touch alcohol.”

“Why not?” Xie Lanshan didn’t understand; it was already summer.

“Didn’t you say you wanted to puke earlier?” Shen Liufei turned to him and said sternly, “Pregnancy vomiting. For the sake of my future son, you should drink some water instead.”

“Hey, that was just a joke...” Xie Lanshan’s gaze fell on Shen Liufei’s throat as he saw the artist take another gulp and said, “Hey, cuz.”

Shen Liufei turned around and pressed his lips against Xie Lanshan’s before the latter could react, and fed him the beer mouth-to-mouth.

The alcohol danced between their tongues; some dripped down from the corner of their lips. Xie Lanshan tasted the booze and returned the kiss passionately as he drowned himself in this intimacy. The bitterness of the beer intertwined with this sweet kiss into a spiral of madness. Xie Lanshan could feel his body melting as he sank deeper into his seat while Shen Liufei reached an arm over and held his waist.

The two generally kept a distance in the municipal bureau and didn’t get too close in front of people, but it was different when they were away from their hometown; they didn’t need to worry about their jobs or the eyes of others. Shen Liufei lifted Xie Lanshan’s chin up and gently pressed his lips against the corner of Xie Lanshan’s mouth where the beer dribbled out.

A passenger nearby on the same bus clicked their tongue in disgust. Xie Lanshan didn’t mind and glanced to see a middle-aged man staring judgmentally. He gave the man a snarky grin and then turned back to bite Shen Liufei’s tongue.

The kiss lasted for about ten minutes before they finally separated.

Shen Liufei turned to look out the window after letting his hands down from Xie Lanshan’s waist. There was a small rural town with no tall buildings outside. The sky was a clear blue, the grass emerald, and the small boats on the river red from the traditional lamps they carried. The small town had only begun a tourist business within the last two years, but it wasn’t a popular destination and was rather quiet compared to the city.

The two men arrived at Guitang today not for vacation, but to search for Shen Liufei’s mother.

Duan Licheng's guess was correct, and the aftereffects of the surgery were complicated. One of them was that people who had gone through the surgery would sometimes trigger deeper memories when they were near death. Just like how Shen Liufei recalled being abused as a child, Xie Lanshan had regained all of Ye Shen's memories.

Shen Liufei waited by Xie Lanshan's bedside for seven days and nights, and Xie Lanshan told him two things as soon as he woke up.

The first was "I love you."

The second was "Your mother isn't dead; I remember everything now. I know where she is."

(ii)

Two decades later, Shen Liufei finally saw his mother again. He could no longer see the rest of the world; his eyes were fixed on that woman dressed in a peach-colored qipao.

Twenty years had passed, and that woman now past fifty had aged. Her hair was white, her body and face were rounder than the old image of her he had in his memories. Fine wrinkles covered the corners of her eyes. But as Shen Liufei stared at his mother from afar, he could still see the beautiful young woman from many years ago. The woman in his dreams combed her hair up like a fine serving lady in ancient paintings. The wrinkles on her face were more beautiful than paper-cut flowers.

The woman sat in front of her little shop, which sold local handmade crafts just like the many other stores in the town. The woman's shop wasn't particularly competitive and rather slow compared to others, but she remained calm. Her eyes narrowed as she enjoyed the slightly moist air and gentle sunlight unique in Jiangnan, occasionally fixing her qipao to smooth it out more comfortably under the light. Her clothing was intricate; the skirt was open on one side, revealing that the peach-colored fabric was decorated with black lining. The collar and sleeves were all hand embroidered. She was like a blooming lotus flower resting elegantly beneath the sky.

In order to not make his visit too sudden, Shen Liufei brought his sketchbook along with him. He pretended to be a tourist and walked over to strike up a conversation with the woman.

Xie Lanshan waited outside the shop quietly, allowing this precious time for the mother and son.

The woman didn't recognize her son due to his change in appearance through the surgery. She could tell from the way the young man dressed that he must be a tourist with good money, so she smiled a little brighter as she happily marketed her little crafts from the store.

"Here, this one would be a great accessory for an outfit. You can buy some more to gift your girlfriend or classmates." The woman assumed he was still in college,

judging by his looks.

“We also have these handmade little bags. They’re a local specialty, and hand embroidered. Look at how artistic they are...”

“And this, they’re cloisonne silver bracelets. Buy one for your mother...”

Shen Liufei nodded and took everything the woman tried to sell without complaint, so he ended up with a handful of bags, bracelets, and local articles of clothing that a man like him wouldn’t wear.

Even the woman was a little embarrassed by the end of it and gave Shen Liufei a slightly awkward smile. “Oh dear, you have to learn how to say no even if you have money to spare. Don’t just buy everything people try and sell you.”

Shen Liufei’s expression was still empty as usual, but in the face of his mother, there was a warm and loving light beneath his gaze. He said, “It’s fine, these are all for my mother. I don’t mind as long as she’s happy.”

“Your mother sure is fortunate to have such a caring and handsome son.”

A young girl called out from afar during their conversation, “Mom!”

Shen Liufei looked over to see a girl of about fifteen or sixteen rush over toward them. The girl had a fresh lotus seedpod in hand as she called the woman in qipao “Mom.”

Shen Liufei quickly realized that his mother had remarried and formed a new family with new children.

The girl donned a pretty and intricate long hairstyle with slanted bangs over her forehead. Her big eyes gave her youthful face bright energy; her features looked very similar to her mother and even a little like himself. Shen Liufei could almost recognize with a glance that this was his little half-sister.

The girl wasn’t shy and seemed quite interested in this tall and handsome young man. She saw him carry a drawing board and asked, “Are you here to draw? A lot of art students come here to paint the scenery. I also want to become an artist.”

Shen Liufei nodded. “I am.”

The girl asked, “What do you draw?”

Shen Liufei responded, “Scenery and people, I draw everything.”

The girl grinned and asked, “Am I pretty enough, then? Can you draw me?”

Shen Liufei nodded.

“Come here, look at yourself. Your hair’s all messed up now from running off. Let Mom retie it for you.”

The woman called her daughter over with a smile. She took the hair tie off and braided the girl’s hair. Shen Liufei didn’t recall his mother being so skilled with crafts, nor did he ever remember her smiling so sweetly and earnestly.

“Wipe off your sweat and put on some lip gloss...” The woman took out a small lip gloss from her pocket and gently brushed a thin layer on the girl’s soft lips. She held the girl’s shoulders, looked her up and down, and after seemingly being satisfied with her daughter’s looks, she smiled even brighter. She then said, “Draw down by the

bridge. The scenery is much better there.”

Green moss covered the red sand rock bridge near the area where the water flowed in. This strange contrast of colors created a unique visual in this peaceful little town. The river flowed gently beneath the bridge; the pencil brushed on the paper. Shen Liufei sketched carefully as Xie Lanshan quietly stood by his side.

An adolescent girl at this age couldn’t sit still. She wasn’t able to move as the subject of the drawing, but her mouth was always open for conversation as she asked Shen Liufei questions like she was from the national census. Finally, she got to the most curious question she had and asked, “Are you two... a couple?”

Shen Liufei didn’t answer and Xie Lanshan responded, “What do you think?”

“Sure looks like it.” The girl studied both men again; the two were picturesquely tall and handsome when they stood together, like the most perfect couple in her eyes. She then asked, “There’s a lot of places that are open for same-sex marriage now. Will you guys go somewhere to get married?”

The question was a little too much to consider. Xie Lanshan laughed and said, “You sure are a smart girl.”

“Marriage is a very important part of life to many people and you need to find the right person. It has nothing to do with gender.” The little girl certainly was a progressive soul who opened up, even without anyone asking. “My mom used to suffer a lot when she was younger. Her old husband would beat her all the time and the husband’s family even tried to trap her in the house. She used to just take it all at first until she realized she couldn’t and rebelled; now look at her, she’s living so well! She always told me that if I ever get into a bad marriage, yell back if he yells at you and divorce him if he beats you. She said that it’s never too late for a woman to stand up for herself, just don’t die like a helpless frog in a warm pond—get up even if you’re in a pool of blood...”

Perhaps out of a natural familiarity with the two men, she kept repeating her mother’s words until she suddenly covered her mouth and then giggled. “Oh man, what am I saying?” She stretched her neck and attempted to look at that drawing board she couldn’t see, asking, “Are you done? Did you make me pretty?”

Even without Xie Lanshan telling him the truth, Shen Liufei already had a good guess of what happened after seeing the vibrant light on his mother’s face. He faintly smiled, finished the last few strokes on the paper, and said, “It’s done.”

He gave the portrait to the little girl, left the items he paid for in the shop, and said he would come to pick them up tomorrow. After they bid this happy family a farewell, Shen Liufei and Xie Lanshan found a small tavern to stay overnight.

The town of Guitang was a closeknit community that preserved many traditional cultures. Houses were virtually glued to each other in this town, like the residents saw each other as family.

Night fell as the river fogged up beneath the moonlight. All of the families loved hanging lanterns in front of their houses. Red glows lit up at nighttime like peaceful

stars of happiness that were within arm's reach.

But only those who wished to would grasp the star light.

Shen Liufei stood before the window and watched the quiet scenery outside.

Xie Lanshan asked him, "Are you going to visit her tomorrow?"

"No," Shen Liufei said. "It's enough to know she's living well. There's no need to bother her anymore."

"Maybe it's not bothering her, maybe she would be willing to accept you..."

"I wasn't born out of a loving marriage for her, neither was my brother. That's why she didn't leave him out when she tried to rebel..."

"That's not true," Xie Lanshan said. "I think your brother's death really was an accident."

The woman was raped by the uncle who had his eyes on her for a while, Zheng Chenlong. Yet her husband blamed her and believed she was in the wrong for seducing the man. After another painful beating, the woman finally couldn't withstand it anymore. She poisoned their drinking water in the hopes of taking down the entire abusive family.

She hadn't used enough poison. Her tough and strong husband didn't die, and instead grabbed an axe and threatened to kill her.

The woman grabbed the axe in the end while the poison weakened him. At that moment, years of pain and hatred finally poured out of her as she dismembered the whole family as they struggled on the ground. The fourteen-year-old eldest son was studying art outside. The strange commotion woke the eight-year-old younger son and he stepped down the stairs to find his mother.

The woman's eyes were bloodshot; madness consumed her. She heard a sound behind her and turned, axe in hand, ready to butcher.

When a fourteen-year-old Ye Shen heard the sound and arrived at the woman's house, the massacre was already taking place.

The young boy was an orphan whose legal guardians didn't care for him, but he enjoyed roaming around freely. He was smart enough to know he'd never feel at home anywhere he went, as if he was a bird that could always fly off at any moment.

The only time he ever received any bit of warmth and care was from this timid, quiet woman.

He saw the woman on the brink of breakdown. The young boy stood up and gave her a way to escape. He quickly rearranged the crime scene and pinned the blame on Zheng Chenlong, who was lying unconscious on the ground.

In order to make it seem as though the woman was dead, he made her spill some blood and ripped off a piece of her skin.

The young boy drove off with Zheng Chenlong's car and took the man's body away, burying him deep in the mountains. No one found the body until a decade later when the mountain began developments and exposed the bloodied truth.

Shen Liufei had been searching diligently for his mother over the years, and the weight in his heart finally rested now that he saw her. He felt a strange sense of relief that he'd never experienced before.

"You're the kid who kept visiting my house when I was young, right?" The two men lay on the bed after a shower. Shen Liufei was still puzzled and asked, "The Hunting Net Operation allowed for cold cases to be reopened. You were afraid the truth of my mother still being alive would be exposed, so you harmed Zhuo Tian, but ended up letting her escape in the end so that you could be arrested on purpose. But I still don't understand. Why are you willing to shoulder crimes that you never committed?"

"Who knows? Maybe I'm tired of this materialistically fulfilling but mentally exhausting and empty life. Or maybe I just pitied them for having to suffer because they were born a different gender."

Shen Liufei almost wanted to laugh at this twisted savior mentality. He turned and embraced Xie Lanshan, then said, "We're two oddballs like no other in the world. For the sake of world peace, let's not cause others trouble and just trouble one another."

Xie Lanshan laughed and bit Shen Liufei's nose playfully as he joked, "Didn't you say you wanted a son on the bus? C'mon, give me some trouble."

They kissed and stripped the clothes off each other. The lights were off in the room, so only the red ambience lighting shone through the window. The romantic atmosphere sparked their desires. Like budding flowers in spring, their limbs intertwined until Shen Liufei took the upper hand and pressed Xie Lanshan down. He knelt between Xie Lanshan's legs, allowing his hardened cock and raw desire to face his lover.

"I'd rather have a daughter. They say daughters always take after fathers more." In contrast to Xie Lanshan's bright and large eyes, Shen Liufei's were sharper and colder but had unique and attractive curves.

"No rush," Shen Liufei said. His lower body was already burning up, but his face was still cold and stoic. He turned over and kissed Xie Lanshan's finger, then said, "Work hard and I'm sure one or two children would be no big deal; I'm sure you could even bear ten if you wanted."

Xie Lanshan raised a hand up and brushed his fingers against the corner of the man's eyes, then said affectionately, "All the beauty and romance in this world resembles you, but nothing is as good as you."

A strange urge to tease each other arose during this cold conversation. Shen Liufei suddenly pulled Xie Lanshan's legs up, forcing him into an awkward position as he knelt and gave Xie Lanshan a blowjob.

No words were necessary. Shen Liufei's nose and cheeks rubbed gently between Xie Lanshan's thighs until he opened his mouth and bit on the man's scrotum. His tongue gently brushed the skin, followed with a slow suck that enveloped the entire sensitive area.

Of course, being stuck upside down wasn't the most comfortable position. Just as Xie Lanshan was about to call out in complaint, he felt a tongue enter his hole from behind. He was electrified that moment; all his words became moans that rolled out from his throat.

Shen Liufei softened the hole with his own saliva, ensuring that it was moist enough for later. He then freed a hand and shoved two fingers into the freshly wet hole.

Xie Lanshan's reflex acted as soon as he felt the fingers inside him. Blood rapidly flowed down so his cock hardened, and his body temperature soared as if everything inside him was boiling.

He could feel wetness flowing out onto Shen Liufei's fingers from the excitement.

"Hey, cuz... let's lie down, eh...?" Xie Lanshan asked, feeling his whole body melt from the sensation, though he was unable to maintain this upside-down position.

Shen Liufei pretended not to hear and stood up. After finding a good angle, he let himself into Xie Lanshan, going all the way inside in one swift motion.

"Hey, cuz, I'm serious, my head's... ah..." There wasn't much lubrication, so Xie Lanshan was already losing his voice from the moans. It was only thanks to his stamina that he could still talk after the extreme foreplay—anyone else would have already been knocked out by now.

Shen Liufei seemed to be in a good mood; he began asking as he thrust, "Am I good to you?"

"...Yes."

"Do you feel loved?"

"...Yes."

Blood was rushing to Xie Lanshan's head, there was no time to think. He merely responded with one word to all the questions he was being asked. His cock grew hotter and harder with every motion, as if they were searching for eternal paradise in that tight tunnel of flesh. Shen Liufei was also enjoying the sensation; despite his usual calm expression, his hoarse voice revealed his excitement.

"Cuz..." Xie Lanshan felt the object inside pull out suddenly before it was violently pushed right back in. He screamed in ecstasy at that moment, losing his composure, and hung off of Shen Liufei.

Of course, Shen Liufei didn't care for this slight inconvenience and continued thrusting what felt like countless times before he finally came.

Xie Lanshan was ready to crash after being forced upside down for so long. The redness on his face remained even when he was finally placed horizontally in bed. His legs were too tired, and his hole was not ready to close up after such intense action. This new position allowed the wetness to leak out from him, covering the sheets like a layer of white snow.

Shen Liufei leaned down and kissed Xie Lanshan's lips.

Whether it was Bai Shuo and Xie Lanshan or Shen Liufei and Ye Shen, their fates had been connected even before they realized. Their love brought them together and, as Shen Liufei deepened the kiss, he said, "I love you too."

After a brief rest, Shen Liufei once again entered Xie Lanshan. They both found another comfortable position and began round two.

Their bodies passionately tangled together for the entire night. It was near sunrise when the two men finally fell onto the bed in exhaustion and slept. Xie Lanshan woke up first this time.

He had always woken up to an empty bedside without Shen Liufei. Perhaps the man always had some reservations about this relationship with Ye Shen, but he maintained the contradiction in his mind well. Now that the burden had been lifted, he could finally rest in peace with his lover in his arms.

Shen Liufei lay on the bed, and Xie Lanshan rested his head on the man's firm chest, one hand playfully tracing down his body until it reached an important organ. He then rested a leg on Shen Liufei while his hand scratched gently against Shen Liufei's crotch, hoping to wake this part of the body before the man himself. Yet his phone was even more in a rush and rang loudly in the next instant.

"I shouldn't have fucking turned on this phone," Xie Lanshan complained as he saw the sound woke Shen Liufei. He picked up the call. "Hey, Tao, didn't I tell you I'll come in when I feel like it? I know the orientation isn't done yet."

Tao Longyue insisted on killing the mood and called from the other line. "Orientation my ass. There's another murder victim. Get back here and help with the investigation!"

As a newly promoted vice captain, he could skip out on welcoming ceremonies but couldn't leave behind a case. He quickly got up to pack his luggage and rushed back to Hanhai. They tossed their baggage into their home as soon as they got off the plane and headed to the crime scene.

The body had already been taken back for an autopsy, but the search at the scene still continued. Xie Lanshan took a photo of the corpse from Tao Longyue and studied it carefully.

"A civilian was working out at the park yesterday morning and saw a man suspiciously burying something. They later heard the sound of a car driving by and called the cops after. The victim was an adult man around thirty years of age, cause of death was a heavy blow to the head by a large object. There were multiple broken bones in his body. We're initially suspecting that his body was tossed after a fatal car crash," Tao Longyue summarized the case for Xie Lanshan and then turned to Shen Liufei. "Mr. Shen, the witness who called the cops is still around. We need you to help with the sketch of the suspect."

Tao Longyue took Shen Liufei to see the witness while Xie Lanshan stayed at the location where the body was dug up to search for more clues.

He picked up the photo of the body once again, but this time he wasn't looking at the strange man in the photo. Through a familiar death scene, he saw another familiar face—he'd seen this man twenty years ago. He was Shen Liufei's uncle, that sinful and disgusting man who had assaulted another man's wife—Zheng Chenlong.

Zheng Chenlong had always boasted about wanting to rape a young woman, but he didn't pin her down in time and made her fall and drown in a pond while she attempted to run. The girl's family knew that he was the murderer but didn't have evidence to prove the crime. The mother grew sick from anger and died two years later.

That same year, the fourteen-year-old Ye Shen drove the man up onto a deserted mountaintop, but just as he was digging the grave, the man woke up.

Zheng Chenlong was only injured, and none of the wounds were fatal. Yet because he had lost too much blood, he couldn't move temporarily and could only beg the young boy in front of him for mercy. He said that it was just a spur of the moment decision, that despite being a serial rapist, he didn't want to die.

But no matter how much he cried and begged, the young boy only stared at him with a blank face like a snake eyeing its prey.

Perhaps there really are criminals who were born evil in this world; they were people who bestowed judgment through murder, using the stimulation blood and flesh provided to gain simple peace of mind.

"That girl drowned on her own. I didn't kill her..."

Irrked at the man's talking, the young boy lifted a finger and hushed him up, then smiled faintly.

"A-Lan, the branch chief just called and said we need to settle this in three days."

Xie Lanshan lifted his eyes and saw Tao Longyue walk over. That devilish smile on his face once again appeared but vanished before the captain could notice.

"Did you find anything?" Tao Longyue asked.

"Look here." Xie Lanshan pointed at a dent on the victim's skull and said, "This blow came from a spindle-like object, perhaps a long stick with a sharp edge. The surrounding parts of the injury bled badly, which means he was struck before his death. As for the rest of the injuries on the head, the bruises are almost unnoticeable. Aside from potentially covering the injuries beneath the hair, it could be that these injuries were made after death."

"We'll know once the autopsy reports are in," Shen Liufei said as he walked the witness over and extended Xie Lanshan's analysis. "Hiding a body after a car crash is both fleeing from a traffic crime and removing evidence. On the other hand, if they created a fake car accident to cover up the truth of the death, then it could be a homicide."

"This case won't be easy." Xie Lanshan nodded toward Shen Liufei and then proudly lifted an eyebrow. "But three days is more than enough time to solve it."

The clouds in the sky jumbled together on this bright June day. A ray of sunlight hastily pierced through the cage of clouds, shining onto the vast land and water.

Xie Lanshan watched his lover walk toward him as they exchanged a glance.

There was a flash of uncertainty beneath Xie Lanshan's eyes for a moment, yet as Shen Liufei walked closer, the fog disappeared. Just like their first meeting, his heartbeat raced as he saw the man.

Shen Liufei told him through that clear and affectionate gaze:

"All roads lead to Rome, even for gods and demons; yet my desire for you is like a lone flame in the dark yearning for eternity."

The End.

Extra 1: The Unwavering Innocence

The rain shower lightened up the moment the train engine started; for a moment, time seemed to have stopped.

Sui Hong sat by the window. The buildings and trees outside seemed to all move in slow motion as they backed off against the loud sounds of the train trudging away on its tracks. Shortly after, the scenery blurred before his eyes, but Sui Hong wasn't in the mood to appreciate the outside view. He took off his heavy coat and pulled out another bottle of cough syrup from his pocket.

His melancholy gaze fell on this small brown bottle as he silently stared at it.

Chi Jin had mailed him a package just before the incident—a whole package full of cough syrup. Captain Sui finally had time to return home and clean up his belongings after disassembling Mu Kun's organization. During that time, he'd discovered one bottle was open, and in it, he found a small piece of paper that noted an address he didn't recognize.

This was also the destination of the train.

In the border areas of the Hannan Province, there was a small village that people often forgot the name of, but rumor had it that loquat flowers bloomed across the whole mountain range.

Sui Hong was only twenty-five when he saved a young Chi Jin from the fire. Back then, he was still just a member of the main special force team in the city's municipal bureau. The latest congressional convention of the nation had just passed, and all public security officers were called to take part in civil activities to help their communities. Only the frontline antidrug forces were not required to join in.

But Sui Hong always had an inexplicable interest in and resemblance to the poor but brave young boy. After the fire, he would often take time off to visit him.

Noticing how the boy's guardians often neglected the child and that he lived in a run-down house, Sui Hong would sometimes invite the boy over to stay for a few days so he could study for school.

One young man and one boy shared the same living space for a while. These times were relaxed and fun. The two would often play basketball together or watch some films in the afternoon at home. Chi Jin was still young and small, so he would lean over and fall asleep on Sui Hong's shoulder while watching TV. The boy was quiet and innocent when he slept, unlike his normally rowdy demeanor. At one moment like that, Sui Hong had turned to look at the boy and found his slumbering face silly. He

reached out and squeezed the boy's cheeks; Chi Jin hadn't opened his eyes, but he moved his head and buried his face in Sui Hong's chest.

Sui Hong wanted to tease the boy more but didn't want to wake him up. Soon, he also leaned his head back and slowly closed his eyes.

As the hot June weather arrived, and white clouds floated above in the blue sky, the boy rested on the man's knees and they both slept peacefully on the sofa.

A few years later, Sui Hong solved a major case and became the youngest captain in the history of the Blue Fox Commando. A cop's job was already filled with difficulties, but even Sui Hong's personal issues became a headache. As soon as he reached thirty, Sui Hong's family began pestering him about marriage. His parents were waiting to play with their grandchildren, only to find their son completely dormant when it came to relationships, almost as if he had no interest in the prospect of a lifelong commitment. So, they began searching their networks to introduce potential partners to him and to force him into arranged dates.

Sui Hong was a respectful son who couldn't fight against his parents, so he naturally accepted the request to see a young woman.

The girl's name was Mi Mai, and her appearance was pretty and clean, just like her name.

The young woman from a good family almost fell for the captain of the Blue Fox at first glance, and Sui Hong's impression of her was quite positive.

The good beginning could have led to a happy ending if it continued, but he made the fatal mistake of telling the young boy about it.

Sui Hong glossed over it, almost like it was a joke, but Chi Jin, who had just entered his last year of high school, was shocked. He then immediately told the captain not to see her anymore.

"Why not?" Sui Hong was shocked.

"Because you can't. If you see her again, I—I..." the young teen stuttered and then yelled, "I won't take the university entrance exam."

"Now that's harsh. The girl is nice. She's very passionate and smart too. Besides, I like the shape of her eyes." Sui Hong teased him, then said, "People need to be with one another and have a home to survive in this world."

Chi Jin's face froze immediately. His heart was crushed by the words. He furrowed his eyebrows and pondered for a bit, then placed a hand on his heart and said as if he was making an oath, "Then I'll stay by your side."

Sui Hong was taken aback and stared wordlessly at the young man.

"Can you wait a few more years? Five—just five more years should be enough." The teen pressed a hand on his chest as if reciting some cheesy soap opera line, then held another hand out with his pinkie up. His gaze was blazing, but his tone was warm and firm.

Wait for me, wait until I can fight. Wait until I can kneel before you, hold my head high and tell you, for my home, for my country, and for you.

Sui Hong's heart softened at this bright gaze and finally he said, "Are you... really not going to take the exam?"

Chi Jin lowered his gaze shyly. "I still have to take it because I promised I'd get into the police academy. Then I can become a special forces officer like you."

Sui Hong stared at the boy's face, his eyebrows furrowing slightly as if he was pondering an extremely serious matter. After a long silence, he finally smiled and said, "All right, I won't see her anymore."

Chi Jin's eyes gleamed in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes, but let's make a bet." Sui Hong smiled wider as he pinched Chi Jin's arm slightly and said, "Your arms are too skinny, no special forces officer looks this thin."

Chi Jin jumped like he was on a springboard and said, "I'll go out to run right now!"

Sui Hong laughed and reminded him, "Don't forget to keep your grades up in other subjects!"

He admitted the boy didn't have many assets. He'd been thin like paper as soon as he took his clothes off, but Sui Hong quickly realized that Chi Jin seemed to have taken this bet seriously. The teen began eating a lot more and worked out intensely. Not including his other exercises, he would run over ten thousand meters every day.

The boy gained some muscle, but the training was getting a little too hard. His family almost pitied him and tried to blame Sui Hong for setting an unrealistic example, but that still couldn't shake the boy's determination to become a special forces officer. By the last semester of his final year in high school, Chi Jin moved in with Sui Hong instead of returning home.

Thankfully, Sui Hong was a full-time officer with postgraduate degrees from prestigious schools, which was rare for someone like him. Because of this, he could train Chi Jin during the day and tutor the boy at night.

Once, Sui Hong caught the young adult hiding something from him, which was exposed as soon as Sui Hong called him from behind. The boy revealed a bottle of some indie-brand protein powder.

Sui Hong was upset but also wanted to laugh. He tugged on Chi Jin's ears and said, "You're not even old. Why would you need to take this?"

Once he realized he'd been caught red-handed, the boy's face flushed in an instant. Even his ears heated up in embarrassment. He stuttered and said, "This bodybuilder in my class told me about it. He said it works like magic."

"You're not bodybuilding, and besides, we don't know what's in these indie brands. It could end up harming you." Sui Hong let go of the boy and took the bottle of powder, then turned away with it. "I'm confiscating this!"

“Huh? No, that was expensive! I ditched class to pick up a part-time gig—” Chi Jin chased behind Sui Hong and quickly closed his mouth after he realized he’d outed himself.

“Oh, and you’re skipping class in your last year of high school to work?” Sui Hong stopped and turned around.

The teen knew he’d screwed up and froze. Only his pretty eyes stared like a poor puppy at Sui Hong, clearly still attempting to put up some amount of resistance.

Sui Hong’s temper disappeared when he saw those eyes. He sighed, “All right, if you promise to not skip class anymore, I’ll make steak for dinner tonight...”

“I promise! I swear!” The boy’s face beamed as he cheered and made his promise.

Sui Hong laughed at this silly gesture.

Though the two-bedroom unit had been a rental, after the boy moved in, it finally became more like a home.

Going into winter, even the sun seemed to shiver in the cold. The icy light cast onto the railways like two streams of black rivers stretching into the distance.

Sui Hong opened up the cough syrup bottle after letting his thoughts run free and took a sip. The slight bitterness hidden behind the sweet syrup swirled in his mouth.

He pondered, just when had their close relationship changed?

He recalled when Xie Lanshan died in the Golden Triangle. The surgery was a decision Sui Hong made on his own, and to this day, he wasn’t sure if he had made the right choice.

Now that he thought about it, Xie Lanshan’s personality wasn’t fit for undercover work. The young man almost had no flaws. The only exception was that he could not withstand seeing others in pain even if he had to walk into fire himself.

Of course, Director Peng also noticed this about him, but Xie Lanshan wasn’t the only one who was sent undercover—but no one else made it back alive.

In the face of a living hell, even Xie Lanshan had second thoughts, but the young man was easily convinced back after a simple comment about prosperity and peace.

Afraid of any troubling aftereffects and that the bloodthirsty and dangerous persona might still linger within the young man’s body, Captain Sui had specifically instructed Liu Yanbo to not promote Xie Lanshan.

Most participants of the multinational effort to corner Mu Kun that year returned with promotions—except Xie Lanshan. The young man returned home in great glory, only to fall into a helpless and isolated situation. He was kicked out of the Blue Fox with an arbitrary excuse; even his days in the municipal bureau weren’t particularly fulfilling.

The emblem on his shoulder never changed. When the Hanhai City Municipal Bureau promoted the captain for the violent crimes unit, Tao Longyue couldn’t believe they’d selected him for this merit and felt wronged on behalf of his best friend.

Xie Lanshan wasn't pleased either, but it wasn't about the promotion. He just didn't understand.

Sui Hong still remembered when he once saw Xie Lanshan during a training event, he was shocked at how quickly the surgery's effect had taken hold on the man. The once reserved and almost bricklike young man could now smile brightly around others and even chat.

But when no one else was around, Xie Lanshan would return to being his most beloved subordinate. Xie Lanshan stood before him like a deflated balloon, helpless and weak. He moved his trembling lips and asked, "Captain, I don't care if I can't get promoted, I just don't understand... j-just where did I go wrong?"

Sui Hong analyzed himself and decided that perhaps he had some slight masochist tendencies. After the surgery, he couldn't face the changing "Xie Lanshan," but also couldn't help but keep an eye on the young man. He knew Xie Lanshan was troubled by rumors, discriminated against by his leaders, and even plagued by nightmares. Sui Hong was deeply regretful of his actions and often spent sleepless hours sitting in the dark, mourning for every new misfortune he learned of.

Chi Jin had already moved out by this point. Even if he still tried to cling and asked to stay overnight, Sui Hong would always kick him out mercilessly.

One day at home while he was drinking casually with Chi Jin, Sui Hong's attention was seized by the news of Xie Lanshan shooting down a suspect. He dropped into another long and mournful silence.

The heat of the alcohol rushed through Chi Jin's veins as though it were boiling him from the inside. He always hated seeing his captain look so wistful and asked, "Do you like Xie Lanshan?"

"Yes," Sui Hong responded. "I also care for you and every one of my teammates."

"Not like that..." Chi Jin took in a breath of air, desperately trying to hide the envy inside him, and said, "I meant the kind that speaks to the soul, the kind that makes you desire physical touch, the kind where it must only be you—like love."

Sui Hong looked at him in silence. His feelings toward Xie Lanshan weren't romantic love, but he couldn't understand why the young man in front of him was so hung up on the topic.

"Then why? Why do you always look at him so painfully?" Chi Jin also looked as though he were in agony; his voice trembled, along with his clenched fist. "If you don't like him, then something must be wrong with Xie Lanshan! I've seen with my own eyes how Xie Lanshan let Mu Kun go at the last minute, and even how Mu Kun would rather kill his sniper than take Xie Lanshan's life... I didn't even see bruises on his hands when he returned. You said he's gone through a lot undercover, but to me it seemed like he was enjoying his six years there. Even I could tell something was wrong, why couldn't you? If you don't like him, then why don't you tell Director Peng about all of this—"

The high-ranking officials in the provincial branch could no longer get in touch with Xie Lanshan in the Hanhai City Municipal Bureau. Yet Sui Hong was still afraid that Chi Jin would report these oddities to his boss; there were too many inconsistencies with Xie Lanshan right now. He would not stand a chance if the provincial branch investigated him.

So he decided to tell a lie. Sui Hong told the young man earnestly, *Yes, I like him.*

Chi Jin was stunned; he froze for a while before he finally cried out in despair, “But doesn’t he like Song Qilian? He likes women...”

“It doesn’t matter who he likes. What’s important is that I like him.” Sui Hong suppressed his misery and said, “Trust me, Xie Lanshan never betrayed the Blue Fox. I don’t want any unwarranted investigations to affect his life or career...”

Like a wounded beast, Chi Jin growled out suddenly and jumped toward him.

After an unrestrained brawl, Sui Hong finally realized that his little kid had really grown up. Chi Jin was tall and strong. His muscles were toned from years of training, and he was skilled in physical combat. Finally, Chi Jin won and pinned the captain down.

The two men panted heavily after the brawl.

Chi Jin used up all of his energy to pin Sui Hong down beneath him. His gaze filled with desire as he violently pulled the belt from his pants. The alcohol and lust boiled inside him; his eyes were burning as he stared at the man beneath him, breathing heavily.

He couldn’t stand listening to Sui Hong say that his heart belonged to someone else; those words triggered the suppressed emotions in him as madness consumed his consciousness.

Chi Jin’s hand fell onto Sui Hong’s crotch, but he was quickly stopped by the older man. He leaned down and gently pressed his lips to Sui Hong’s, but didn’t dare to pursue anything further.

He hoped the love of his life would respond in kind, but his feelings and desires were crushed by the unwavering coldness he was met with.

While maintaining this awkward position, Sui Hong said gravely, “Chi Jin, I’m your captain.”

In that next instant, Chi Jin buried his face in Sui Hong’s neck and cried for his unrequited and hopeless love.

Chi Jin sat up. The moment he lifted his head, a single teardrop rolled out from his eyes, down his nose, and dropped onto Sui Hong’s face.

This single tear burned through Sui Hong’s heart. Even many years later, he could still remember the heat of that moment. Perhaps he would never forget it for the rest of his life.

The next day, Chi Jin had knocked on his door with a Nim Jong Cough Syrup box as an apology. He smiled and tried to lighten up the mood, saying, “I know you aren’t

a man to hold a grudge. Just forget everything I said yesterday when I was wasted.”

Sui Hong coughed and pulled out a small brown bottle inside the box and laughed. “I also had a bit too much last night and forgot it all.”

Chi Jin’s eyes dimmed for an instant, then he looked up once again with clarity as he grinned. He left the box of cough syrup in the house and left.

Perhaps that was when the seeds of tragedy had inevitably been sewn. From that day on, Chi Jin saw Xie Lanshan as a rival in love. Envy grew within an imaginary bed until it finally blinded the young man, consuming his heart.

Sui Hong sat on the train and recalled the times when Chi Jin was still young. They would sit side by side on the sofa and switch channels to watch a movie when they grew bored with documentary films.

As always, the boy couldn’t sit still and leaned his head down on the man’s knees, curling up like a big puppy on his master’s legs. The television was playing *Brokeback Mountain*, and the little boy suddenly started crying when he saw the two men on TV embrace each other tightly.

Sui Hong tapped Chi Jin’s back and asked gently, “What’s wrong?”

Chi Jin looked up at him with teary eyes. “Would you... want a relationship with a man?”

Sui Hong may not have had much experience in the field, but he’d never doubted his sexuality and hadn’t thought he would be asked to respond to a question like this. He answered without thinking, “Only if it’s a flame that can light my day, and that fire can last for eternity.”

It wasn’t until the day he felt those lips brush across his own that Sui Hong realized there had always been hints of Chi Jin’s feelings for him. However, he refused to take the crush seriously and always assumed it was just a mistaken emotion, that the kid must have confused admiration with love.

And perhaps he really had. After that night, Chi Jin brought a girl back. When questioned by his teammates, he only said she was a childhood friend and that he wanted to try asking her out.

Ling Yun was the one who told Sui Hong about it.

Sui Hong was obviously shocked. His chest suddenly felt empty. After a long while, he pulled himself back and asked, “How’s the girl?”

“Pretty, really pretty!” Ling Yun said that just from looks alone, the girl was a good match for Chi Jin. She had a pair of pretty eyes and a tall nose; her personality was also bright and bold.

Sui Hong’s heart settled as he faintly smiled. He quickly tossed the memories of that night away and continued living peacefully with his little boy.

Chi Jin turned twenty-five in the blink of an eye, and a thirty-eight-year-old Sui Hong once again faced the pestering of his relatives as they urged him to settle down to have a family.

His gaze fell on the bottle of cough syrup resting on the table as he explained to his parents how dangerous his work was. His life was always on the line and it wouldn't be fair to a young wife to have a husband like him. Of course, his family didn't believe him. They shot back with the fact that drug enforcement officers have married, so what was he waiting for?

Sui Hong also wanted to ask himself sometimes, just what was he waiting for?

The playful bet still occupied his mind from time to time, but it had already been too long. Captain Sui of the Blue Fox no longer wanted anything more than a boss's relationship with his subordinates between him and his team. His friendship with Xie Lanshan had already lured him into a decision he still wasn't sure was right, so what could a deeper bond like love potentially do? Sui Hong couldn't imagine it. Maintaining a distant relationship was much better for him; like a gentle stream of water that wouldn't hurt even if they separated.

He would forever owe a lifetime's worth of guilt to Xie Lanshan, whether it was to the one who had given his life in a foreign land or to the one now who lived in a different body.

Besides, his little boy had already decided to fix his mistakes. Even though he no longer saw Chi Jin bring the pretty little girl over anymore, he always received positive news whenever he asked about their relationship. Their relationship together remained steady and perhaps they would get married in another two years.

Sui Hong was happy for his little boy. Love was like a dream, especially to drug enforcement officers like them who lived on wires. Having a fulfilling love that was accepted by society was the only thing that could heal their damaged souls.

The train arrived at its destination. Sui Hong found a hotel near the station, placed his luggage down, and followed the address on the paper to the small village.

Every household here had its own loquat trees in their yards; the grand view was almost stunning. Sui Hong learned quickly from the locals that everyone here seemed to know Chi Jin. They praised the young man at every mention, saying that he was a dependable man.

An old farmer who looked very spirited and young for his age told Sui Hong that even though it looked like there was an abundance of loquat trees here, only a few households had been engaged in this trade since the beginning. The cough syrup brewed from the loquat trees was not the same as the ones that could be bought from stores. The locals insisted on using old recipes passed down over generations and each batch was homemade, so the syrups were especially good for helping coughs. Their business relied on word of mouth over generations, so they'd only had a local market until the young man discovered this village.

The old farmer explained joyfully as he gave Sui Hong a tour around the farm, “Officer Chi is very kind. He taught us how to market our products on the internet, saying that we need to go beyond our in-person sales methods. I don’t understand it very well. I just did as he said and now there’s a huge business here. Cars drive in and out every day from distributors all over the country.”

Seeing how the first two families began making bank with their business, others followed suit. Some started specializing in making syrups with leaves, others made loquat honey, and some even made jam out of the sweet fruits. In short, they began building a business around the loquat. One after another, the mountains were quickly filled with loquat trees and every household began to make money.

Many in the village would stop to greet the old farmer as they passed by. Their eyes would turn to the tall and handsome Sui Hong, then ask the farmer who this sophisticated man was.

The old farmer laughed and said, “That’s Officer Chi’s captain! He’s definitely the only man fit to be Officer Chi’s captain!”

The villagers grew reverent as soon as they heard Sui Hong’s relationship to Chi Jin and joined in to converse with him.

A villager held Sui Hong’s hand and shook it wildly, thanking him. “We don’t really understand these commerce and business things in the village. Officer Chi was the one who helped get patents!”

Another villager chimed in, “It was impossible to sell ripe loquat fruits in the past, so we just let them rot on the ground, but Officer Chi filmed me brewing the ripe fruits into jam and uploaded the video on the internet, then added a lot of interesting commentary. That got lots of clicks right away, and my business also grew thanks to him!”

Every comment was praise for Chi Jin. Sui Hong smiled as he listened to them, sometimes coughing but without interrupting anyone.

The old farmer later said that Officer Chi drove a truck over just before the year’s end and never took it back. There were plenty of cars and trucks driving in and out of the village every day. The villagers all knew that Chi Jin was a busy police officer and would come to take the truck someday, so they hadn’t paid much attention to it. It wasn’t until Sui Hong paid a visit that they realized Chi Jin hadn’t shown up in a while.

Sui Hong frowned slightly and asked, “Where’s the truck?”

The old farmer said, “This way.”

A blue and white truck was parked alongside the other vehicles filled with cough syrup.

Sui Hong followed the old farmer and asked someone to open up the doors.

Just as he thought, the truck of red ice neither Mu Kun nor the Blue Fox managed to find was hiding quietly in this place.

Sui Hong made a call back to the provincial branch immediately, gave an exact address to his current location, and said, "Send people over. We finally found Mu Kun's red ice."

The mountains covered in loquat trees surrounded the village on all sides. It was almost blooming season, but the trees on the mountaintops all seemed to be procrastinators.

By the time forces were over to take the truck of red ice, Sui Hong was sitting behind a tree facing the mountains. He looked up at the distant skies and suddenly recalled the times he trained with Chi Jin in the mountains.

Just before Mu Kun returned, their captain took the young Blue Fox members up to the mountains for their usual half-month retreat training in the wild.

The training always followed the same tradition: no digital devices or entertainment items were allowed during the training period. There was no signal up there, anyway. The young twenty-year-olds were isolated in the mountains during the burning hot season in August for ten days.

On the second to last training day, the young men could see their improvements. The leaders in the provincial branch celebrated the successful training and brought in boxes full of beer and white wine.

Everyone drank a little more than usual during this celebration.

Only Sui Hong remained sober. He wasn't one to touch alcohol or tobacco, and his countless injuries over a decade of services had affected his tolerance, so he graciously stayed away. He also wasn't a fan of parties. After grabbing some food to eat, he sat alone beneath a locust tree.

Night fell, but the party continued. Ling Yun was still in high spirits as he dragged Chi Jin over to offer a cup of wine to their captain. Sui Hong didn't drink wine, so Ling Yun happily downed the cup for his captain and then rushed back gleefully to his teammates.

He left a helpless Chi Jin who stood stiffly in front of Sui Hong with a large glass in hand, eyes reddened. The liquor in the container was only half-filled. The young man looked to be tipsy already.

Sui Hong laughed and called him over. "What are you standing around for? Come sit over here."

Chi Jin sat down beside his captain as he was told, but didn't speak and only drank. The two hadn't spent time together alone in a while. Even if everything appeared the same on the outside, some things had changed after that night.

With a faint smile on his face, Sui Hong silently watched the young men only a slight distance away horse around.

He wasn't sure how long he sat, but all the other team members had been knocked out from the alcohol. Sui Hong turned around and noticed Chi Jin was also sleeping by the tree. The young man's face was still reddish, his breathing even, and his lashes

trembled slightly in his sleep. This innocent scene reminded Sui Hong when the young man had been even younger. The flies in the woods circled around him; a few even landed on his eyelids.

Sui Hong leaned in and saw Chi Jin's face beneath the moonlight. He looked at those long and thin lashes and the man's tall nose, then raised a hand to brush off the fly from the young man's face.

This small gesture woke Chi Jin, who suddenly grabbed Sui Hong's wrist while his eyes remained closed, as if it was a reflexive action in his sleep.

Sui Hong didn't pull away and allowed his hand to be gently placed on Chi Jin's face.

Chi Jin repeated through his dreams, "I miss you a lot."

The evening fog descended, and the moisture in the air thickened. Sui Hong assumed the young man was thinking of his fiancée and said softly, "One more day, and you'll see her soon."

Chi Jin didn't open his eyes and instead slyly pursued further, using his inebriation as an excuse. He kissed Sui Hong's fingers gently, allowing a single tear to roll down his cheek.

He then lightly nibbled at Sui Hong's fingers as he continued pressing them to his lips, then mumbled, "Let's bet on something. When the white flames of the day reach eternity, you'll let me love you."

Sui Hong's body temperature was lower than average due to his chronic illness. He could feel the warmth at his fingertips, which also warmed his heart. Enchanted by that moment, he leaned down to comfort his little boy with his lips.

A bug bite woke Ling Yun. He looked up and saw two shadows leaning closely together from afar. He rubbed his eyes and called out, "Captain?"

Their lips were only a hair's width apart, and the call broke the spell. Sui Hong felt apologetic for his actions, and even more so to Chi Jin's fiancée. He coughed twice, pulled his hand away from Chi Jin's face, and walked away.

Sui Hong only found out at Chi Jin's funeral that there was no fiancée at all.

He saw the pretty girl at the service and learned from her that she was Chi Jin's cousin. Perhaps he was afraid of making things awkward for both parties, so Chi Jin had decided not to make Sui Hong worry.

A powerful gust of wintery wind blew by. Sui Hong felt the icy air and stood up. The local police officers arrived quickly. Now that the missing red ice had been found, he could also leave this place.

The old farmer walked over and noticed the man was ready to leave, then called out, eyes beaming, "Oh, Captain Sui, great timing! The loquat flowers are blooming!"

Sui Hong turned around and saw the moment the flowers were in full bloom.

Perhaps that gust of wind earlier had reminded the flowers of the season. All of them had opened at once. The petals were snow white, their bases a crimson red, and their stamens a golden yellow. The small flowers consumed the trees as if they were dominating the mountains.

Sui Hong stood frozen at this majestic natural scene.

Bud after bud, petal after petal, the loquat flowers bloomed proudly as their elegance decorated the entire mountain range; even sunlight couldn't compare to the shimmering white of these flowers.

At this very moment, he felt it. He felt his boy embrace him from behind, his lips pressed by his ear.

Sui Hong's hands trembled after this long-awaited and realistic touch, then a tremble spread through his whole body. He tried to smile but could only close his eyes quietly, allowing a tear to fall to the ground.

He heard the boy say, *Captain, look at this mountain blooming with loquat flowers, just like the eternal flames that can warm and light your day.*

Extra 2: One Half

In the eyes of many, the Blue Foxes were like a specialized and precise weapon that could be aimed to clear out anything in the way. Yet even the most powerful weapons can make mistakes. Because of Chi Jin's case, half of the Blue Foxes gave their lives, and another two were lost in the final confrontation with Mu Kun. The massive loss of manpower in the most honorable team among the special forces meant training new members became top priority for the Blue Foxes.

The recruitment was, as usual, done through personal recommendations from provincial police academies or provincial officers in other special forces. The selected members would then participate in another round of centralized selection that tested their combat abilities.

On the testing day, Xie Lanshan paid Ling Yun a visit to the hospital.

Ling Yun was in physical rehab just before Xie Lanshan came in. He looked up after hearing a familiar voice and knocked his rehab equipment down, dragging his whole body to the ground along with it. Xie Lanshan offered to help the young man only to be refused as Ling Yun said, "Let me stand up by myself."

It was already a miracle that he was still alive, but he would be disabled for life. At that moment, phantom pain near the amputation site of his leg struck. Despite the issues, the doctors said the young man was extremely enthusiastic about rehab. He had even requested double rehab training time every day.

Ling Yun had lost a lot of weight. He was once a bright, sunny young man who was friendly to everyone, but as he lost weight and his cheeks sank, he seemed to take on a different air. He attempted to pull himself up from the ground in vain. The marble floor seemed covered in wax, dragging him down again and again.

Xie Lanshan didn't lend a hand and watched Ling Yun in silence. He noticed the young man was clenching his teeth—so hard that the veins on his forehead became visible, and his cheeks puffed as he tensed his muscles.

Finally pulling himself up from the ground, Ling Yun was exhausted from even such a simple task. He wiped the sweat off his forehead, carefully pulled his amputated limbs up, and smiled nonchalantly at Xie Lanshan, "Hey, comrade."

Xie Lanshan nodded. "Hey, comrade."

Despite their greeting, the irony was that neither of them was a part of Blue Fox anymore.

Xie Lanshan sat down and asked Ling Yun, who still insisted on training, "How are you?"

Ling Yun responded as he struggled to move, “Not bad. I practically memorized the doctor’s words, ‘stay positive and watch your diet.’ Don’t you think I’m recovering a lot faster than a normal person would?”

“Not bad—” Xie Lanshan’s words were cut off as his gaze fell on Ling Yun’s hand. His voice became hesitant as he said, “Your...”

Mu Kun had cut off Ling Yun’s right thumb, so the doctor replaced it with a toe during the operation, which made his hand look a little strange.

“It looks a bit weird, huh?” Ling Yun noticed that Xie Lanshan was looking at his new “thumb” and turned his head toward the other man. He stuck his thumb up and said, “I don’t care how it looks as long as I can still play games.”

Xie Lanshan laughed as he realized Ling Yun’s hand was recovering well. “Let’s play co-op someday.”

Ling Yun also let out a generous laugh, and his mood was lifted by the mention of gaming. He asked Xie Lanshan, “I heard from Cap that you got a promotion.”

Xie Lanshan nodded. “Vice captain of the homicide unit.”

“Finally a promotion, huh.” Ling Yun knew why Xie Lanshan had been ostracized these last few years and sighed. “But I also heard from Cap that he wanted you to return to Blue Fox.”

“Generations come and go. It’d be awkward for me to return now.” There was a strict age limit to the special forces that required all members to be under twenty-five years old. Xie Lanshan was well past this age, so even if he returned, he’d be put into a leadership position—of course, Xie Lanshan didn’t think he deserved the promotion. A team he couldn’t return to was like a home he couldn’t go back to. *You yearn for it in your heart until it consumes you*, Xie Lanshan told himself, *It’s time to let go.*

“Oh, right, it’s recruitment day for the Blue Fox...” Ling Yun’s eyes widened as he finally recalled and then dragged himself to the window. He stuck his head out the window and gestured to listen; after a short while, he laughed. “I hear them! I hear them singing *Bloodstained Glory!*”

It was a team tradition that the veterans of Blue Fox would lead the new recruits to sing this patriotic song as a form of encouragement before the final test. This year’s test was on a deserted plain thousands of miles away—it was impossible to hear the singing.

But Ling Yun smiled as if he could really hear those voices, and began humming to himself, “Perhaps I’ll bid farewell, never to return. Can you understand? Do you understand...”

The singing stopped abruptly. Ling Yun looked out the window sternly and asked Xie Lanshan, “Do you regret it?”

No additional words were needed; Ling Yun was asking if Xie Lanshan regretted choosing this bloody path to be a hero.

"I'll have to think about it." Xie Lanshan looked down and contemplated. No matter how much he considered it, it wasn't easy to express just how difficult and lonely his path had been. Xie Lanshan also made his way toward the window and watched the fresh summer sky with Ling Yun. He finally admitted, "I do and I don't; I guess it's half and half for me. What about you?"

"Wow, that's pretty hard. I'm sure anyone else would've been left with only anger and regret." Ling Yun didn't respond to the question and instead smiled again. "I'm not like you or Captain Sui. My dream wasn't to become a cop when I was a kid. I didn't train myself to become one either. That's why I didn't pass the Blue Fox recruitment test—I only made it because Captain Sui invited me personally."

"Special skills are bonus points during the test; few in public security can pilot a helicopter," Xie Lanshan said.

"Although I have to say I do have a bit of an obsession with uniforms. My dream was to become a flight attendant when I was a kid. I bet I'd be a heartthrob if I was in that uniform with my looks." Ling Yun continued in a cheery voice before Xie Lanshan could respond. "I went to vocational school and studied flight hospitality. After about a semester, I got tired of putting on a customer service smile all day, so I switched to helicopter piloting. The program was empty because everyone preferred mainstream airplanes, so I could still join. I remember they used to say at school that you might as well get a license for operating an excavator instead."

"If you did do that, you'd never have made it into the Blue Fox." Xie Lanshan laughed.

"That's why I said it's fate," Ling Yun said. "I found out after graduation that finding a job with piloting helicopters was hard, and my family was panicking. One day, while aimlessly riding on the subway, I saw a promotional commercial for a police academy. I noticed the men were dressed in police uniforms that were cooler than a flight attendant's—no joke, I was shaking in excitement at that time. So, I went back home and applied to go into the police academy, and that's how I became Chi Jin's mentee..."

He knew about Chi Jin's death already. The word "death" was a neutral and cold word; "sacrifice" would have added a more personal touch, but Chi Jin was a dirty traitor in the eyes of the provincial bureau, and everyone refused to speak of him. The surviving Blue Fox members also quietly erased his existence from their lives, like dusting off something insignificant.

Despite the disability that Chi Jin had gifted him that would haunt him for his life, Ling Yun couldn't tell whether he resented the man. He was merely numb.

The warm summer breeze blew silence into the conversation. Xie Lanshan finally spoke after a while, "What do you plan on doing from now on?"

"The province arranged a job for me. They wanted me to be a guide for school tours to the official police training grounds in the provincial bureau." Objectively speaking, it wasn't a bad job; tours weren't daily, so it was more like a part-time gig,

but Xie Lanshan heard that Ling Yun had refused the offer.

These acts of charity were still too painful for him.

Even when others called his name, he felt anguish. *Ling Yun, Ling Yun...* like the clouds soaring above the sky, but an eagle with only a broken wing doesn't deserve this beautiful name.

"How are they still singing? The testing should be done by now." As if he'd caught another lyric of the battle song thousands of miles away, Ling Yun felt his blood boil and he sang along with his comrades:

Perhaps my eyes will shut and open nevermore.

Will you understand my silent emotions?

Perhaps I will sleep forever, to wake nevermore.

Will you believe I have transformed into mountains?

Suddenly, tears filled Ling Yun's eyes. He said quietly, "It would be better if I'd died in the line of duty..."

Xie Lanshan didn't want to intrude on this young man's wounds and quietly turned toward the door. Just as he was about to leave, he heard the young man behind him say, "Xie Lanshan, my answer is the same as yours."

Xie Lanshan turned to see Ling Yun's back facing him. The young man's gaze was still fixed outside the window. He was still turned to the howling summer, the exuberant greens, the roaring vehicles, the inseparable couples, and the children playfully chasing one another in the parks. He faced the manifestation of the phrase etched into the hearts of all Blue Fox members: *a peaceful world*.

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't regret my decision, but..." Ling Yun chuckled through his tears and raised the new thumb on his right hand. "Half and half, I guess."

Extra 3: I'm Not Here

After his promotion, Xie Lanshan followed Shen Liufei's advice and brought his mother, Gao Zhuyin, back home from the hospital.

Like a jolly mother-in-law, Gao Zhuyin was very fond of Shen Liufei. She would greet him every morning, make breakfast for him, and even offer to pour his coffee. Shen Liufei was an early riser, but Gao Zhuyin always found a way to get up earlier despite his efforts to stop her. She even treated the five cats like her grandchildren, but still adamantly refused to become close to Xie Lanshan.

She seemed to still be convinced that he wasn't her son. If Shen Liufei weren't home, Gao Zhuyin would have locked herself in her room, refusing to stay in the same space as Xie Lanshan.

Though she no longer screamed and yelled at him like before, Xie Lanshan knew that his mother didn't want to see him. So, during the few days Shen Liufei flew back to the States to visit his adoptive father, Xie Lanshan locked himself in the bureau for overtime work. It wasn't that he had any big cases as of late, he simply wanted to keep himself away from his mother as much as possible. Yet every time he went home, he would stand still in front of Gao Zhuyin's door for a while, knock gently, and say, "Mom, I'm back."

Sometimes, he would leave a bouquet of fresh flowers in front of the door and quietly walk away.

Gao Zhuyin was a woman who enjoyed the finer aspects of life, especially flower arrangement.

On that day, Xie Lanshan planned to place another bouquet outside her room, but Gao Zhuyin didn't notice the sound outside her door and opened it just as Xie Lanshan was about to put the flowers down. Their eyes met unexpectedly; Xie Lanshan's eyes widened and Gao Zhuyin was stunned.

Yet before Xie Lanshan could even call out "Mom," a disgusted expression surfaced on Gao Zhuyin's face before she slammed her door shut.

The next morning, Xie Lanshan found that bouquet of roses and lilies tossed into the kitchen trash can. The fresh flowers still bloomed proudly after their single night stay.

Even Xie Lanshan felt awkward living in the same household without being able to see his mother, and the rare occasion they met always ended in more awkwardness. Eventually, he decided to simply not go home. He crashed at Tao Longyue's place for a night. Coincidentally, Su Mansheng wasn't home—she was pregnant, so she'd

decided to visit the convent during that time. Of course, no one would have expected that this night would become the start of a disaster—Gao Zhuyin's mental stability was weakest during nighttime, and she had run away from the house while no one was home.

The next morning, the municipal bureau received an assault report from a nearby supermarket. A girl had been assaulted by someone holding a knife, and it wasn't clear whether the suspect was sober or sane, but they wouldn't listen to others when asked to put the knife down. Xie Lanshan's blood ran cold when he heard the story and instinctively assumed that the person with the knife was his own mother. He exchanged a quick glance with Tao Longyue and rushed out to the supermarket.

The person who reported the crime hadn't explained clearly over the phone, and Xie Lanshan was only able to let out a sigh of relief when he arrived to see that the suspect wasn't his mother. It was a middle-aged man with a wound on his face and dirt on his pants. He was shirtless and exposed his strong build as he held a young girl hostage in his arms. The girl looked like a teenager. Her face reddened as the man's tight arm squeezed her neck.

To avoid harming bystanders, Tao Longyue quickly evacuated the crowd of civilians around the supermarket and noticed a familiar figure among them: Gao Zhuyin. As the wife of a cop, she showed courage even in the face of a criminal and walked toward the middle-aged man. She gently said to him, "What's bothering you? Put the knife down, you can talk to me. My son's a cop. He can help you if you're in trouble." Her eyes glowed in pride as she spoke of her son, and her pale face also grew pink with life. The middle-aged man seemed to calm a bit as he asked, in slightly accented Mandarin, "Can he really?"

"Yes, yes, he can. My son's the best cop in the world..." Gao Zhuyin continued to walk toward the man. "Here, put the girl down..."

"Why should I believe you? You said your son's a cop, then bring him over to me!" The middle-aged man tensed as he noticed the arrival of cops carrying guns. He tightened his grip on the girl as he swung the knife in his hand aimlessly, seeming to gesture that he planned on taking her with him.

The situation became dangerous within moments. Gao Zhuyin fell to the ground as she tried to dodge the knife, and the girl was nearly suffocating in the tight grip. Tears rolled down her face uncontrollably. Xie Lanshan stepped in at that moment and pulled out his badge. "Hey, bro, I'm a vice captain of the violent crimes unit in the municipal bureau. I know you've faced some troubles, but it'll help no one holding this girl hostage. How about you let her go and have a talk with me?"

Xie Lanshan had noticed that the suspect's expression changed at the mention of his troubles, so he spoke earnestly and sincerely to the man. The casual "hey, bro" emphasized he intended to have a dialogue. The suspect exclaimed, "I want to talk! But if I let go of this girl, you'll shoot me down!" The middle-aged man drew a line down the girl's arms, threatening the cops in the market.

The knife was long and sharp, so her blood splattered along the wound. The girl was stunned and too terrified even to cry out loud.

“Bro,” Xie Lanshan spoke without hesitation in fear for the girl’s safety. “I’ll take her place.”

“Sure.” The middle-aged man still couldn’t trust these cops; he pulled out some cable cords from his pocket and tossed them in front of Xie Lanshan. “Get someone to tie up your hands in these, then slowly walk toward me.”

Xie Lanshan picked up the cords and handed them to Tao Longyue. He turned his back toward the captain, and without a second word, allowed his friend to tie a knot around his hands.

Xie Lanshan continued to chat with the middle-aged man as he was getting tied, purposefully putting on an accent, “Hey, bro, I hear a bit of accent in your Mandarin. Are you from the Chuanhui? How’s your family doing?”

“Not good!” The man was certainly from the Chuanhui area neighboring Hanhai. He roared at this comment and said, “We won’t even have a home anymore!”

Xie Lanshan turned his back to show his tied hands before facing the suspect again, walking slowly toward him.

“Chuanhui area is undergoing some teardowns and development right now. You said you have nowhere to live...” Xie Lanshan pondered slightly, checked the man’s face, which was clearly bruised from being beaten. Next he observed the dirt on the man’s pants, and asked with a frown, “Your house was torn down by force?”

Bull’s-eye. The man was consumed by rage and anguish; he swung the knife in his hands again, but this time less aggressively and with less violence. “Those developers just come and tear down houses before everything is signed and taken care of, and beat you when you fight back. Calling the cops resulted in nothing, and they later just brought in bulldozers to tear our houses down. Every one of us was left to sleep on the streets...”

Xie Lanshan pressed his eyebrows down further. “You can’t be rash even if you’re desperate. Now that you’re in the city, you should let the police here know about the situation. You can report the exact time and place the forceful removals occurred, whether there was unlawful occupation of any land, any injured persons, any theft of personal items, and if the local police branches were also involved in unlawful activities. We can give it a thorough investigation and give you a proper response.” These words were powerful and firm, and before the suspect realized it, Xie Lanshan was already standing in front of him. He let the teenage girl go as promised, yet before she could run to safety, Gao Zhuyin suddenly screamed at Xie Lanshan, “How dare you impersonate my son! You’re not even a cop!”

The already aggravated middle-aged man was convinced he had been tricked and became enraged, swinging his knife toward the girl. Xie Lanshan didn’t have much time to act and instinctively pushed the girl away with his body, taking a blow from the suspect on his arm.

Withstanding the pain, Xie Lanshan untied the loose knot behind him and knocked the suspect down.

The man was arrested, but the wound was deep. Xie Lanshan's arm was covered in blood, which soaked through his clothes within an instant.

Tao Longyue quickly wrapped the wound to stop the bleeding, and walked out to take Xie Lanshan to the hospital. Just as they walked past his mother, Xie Lanshan stopped and gave her a look.

Tao Longyue, who was standing beside his buddy, also stared at Gao Zhuyin and complained, "Hey, old lady, what are you yelling nonsense for? It's one thing if you don't love your son, but don't try and get him killed."

The bleeding was horrifying to see but also familiar to Gao Zhuyin. She recalled old Xie coming back home with similar injuries and felt her heart race; her lips trembled a bit as well. Yet as soon as she met Xie Lanshan's eyes, she turned her head away and said, still unyielding, "He's not my son anyway."

"Hey, old lad—" Xie Lanshan interrupted Tao Longyue and lowered his gaze. With a hand over his wound, he walked away. Thankfully, the injury wasn't too severe, and after sewing the cut up, Xie Lanshan sat in silence in front of the reception as he watched people come and go.

He sat until dusk, then remembered that he couldn't leave his mother alone by herself, so he dragged himself back home.

Xie Lanshan opened the door to be stunned by the scene that welcomed him. Gao Zhuyin had bought groceries and prepared a whole table of food.

"The girl who was saved today insisted on thanking you in person and stayed from the afternoon until just now, saying stuff about how you're such a good cop and good person... what a headache." Gao Zhuyin still looked upset, but she still gestured toward the table of cooked food. In a cold voice, she said, "Go wash your hands and eat. You got injured saving someone, so you should eat well to heal those wounds."

Xie Lanshan washed his hands and sat beside the table. Sautéed mushroom and clams, steamed clams, oyster eggs... those were all of his favorite dishes—or had been his favorites in the past. Gao Zhuyin didn't know that her son was now allergic to shellfish and shot him a glance. "Why aren't you eating?"

Xie Lanshan lowered his head and chuckled, grabbed his chopsticks and bowls, and dug in.

He didn't feel well after dinner and took some medication after the meal, then leaned on the sofa to rest. The allergic reaction quickly caught up to him despite the deterrents; he lifted a hand to cover his eyes as his breathing grew heavy. In the midst of everything, the cats began to climb on him one by one. The one called Lan was Shen Liufei's favorite, so naturally it was a size rounder than the rest, and one step on Xie Lanshan's chest felt like a punch.

These little furballs distracted the discomfort from his reaction. Xie Lanshan played with the cats with his eyes closed, squeezing their ears and noses until he

finally fell asleep.

Around two or three in the morning, Shen Liufei opened the door back home and quietly walked past the dining room. He had rushed back after over ten hours of flight.

Gao Zhuyin was already asleep, and Shen Liufei noticed Xie Lanshan sleeping on the sofa. He walked toward the man and noticed that Xie Lanshan was still frowning in his sleep. Shen Liufei instinctively brushed his fingers against the other man's forehead, attempting to smooth out the frown, but as soon as his fingers landed, he was shocked—Xie Lanshan seemed to have caught a fever.

This gentle touch woke the sleeping man. Xie Lanshan didn't need to open his eyes to know who it was. He reached out and grabbed Shen Liufei's wrist. His grip was tight as he pulled Shen Liufei's hand to his cheek, rubbing gently against the man's palm. Shen Liufei's body temperature was lower than an average person, so it was quite comfortable to the touch.

"You're back early."

"Captain Tao told me you got hurt." Xie Lanshan's cheeks were also burning. Shen Liufei frowned in worry as he said, "You have a fever."

"It's fine... just ate something that didn't agree with me tonight..." Xie Lanshan's breathing was heavy as he spoke, and he was exhausted.

Shen Liufei noticed the shells from seafood in the kitchen's trashcan when he came back. Xie Lanshan didn't care much about the quality of food and wouldn't cook for himself, especially not shellfish, so Gao Zhuyin must have made dinner. His heart ached even more; Shen Liufei pulled his hand away and said gently, "You knew you were allergic. You asked for it."

"But she cooked for me," Xie Lanshan said. He finally opened his eyes and smiled at Shen Liufei. "My mom made my favorite dishes."

"She must be a great cook." Shen Liufei understood what this meal meant to him and stopped scolding Xie Lanshan for his rashness. He brushed Xie Lanshan's hair affectionately and heard Xie Lanshan say, "She isn't... I remember she was never that great. She was generous with the salt, so everything she cooked was over seasoned, but she loved cooking for us, so if Dad and I wouldn't eat everything, she'd get mad..."

His body temperature was still rising, but Xie Lanshan smiled despite feeling his breath grow short. "Hey, cuz, I'm suffocating... I—I can't breathe..."

Shen Liufei unbuttoned Xie Lanshan's shirt and immediately noticed the scars on his body. There were new ones on top of old ones that grew as time went on. Noticing Shen Liufei staring at him, Xie Lanshan laughed. He grabbed Shen Liufei's hand and sat himself up, then after catching his breath, stood up in front of his lover.

Xie Lanshan took off his shirt, unbuttoned his pants—he took everything off.

Even the bandages around his arms were unwrapped, exposing everything in front of Shen Liufei. Ye Shen's body used to be clean and smooth, unscathed without any

scars or injuries. But Xie Lanshan didn't find these scars ugly, and instead seemed quite proud of them.

"Look, I have scars now." He looked down at himself before looking back up at Shen Liufei, asking him grimly, "You don't think they're ugly, do you?"

"They're not." Shen Liufei leaned forward and kissed Xie Lanshan's lips. Their saliva mingled in the deep kiss, and finally, Shen Liufei answered with equal sincerity, "I know... that every scar is a medal of honor for you." Like a young married couple, the two pushed and shoved one another back into their bedroom.

After cleaning themselves up in the shower, the men noticed that Gao Zhuyin was already awake. She was preparing breakfast by the table; the pickled cucumbers were store bought, but the pot of fresh egg-drop congee was her cooking.

As the two men sat down beside her, Gao Zhuyin lowered her head to serve the congee and said calmly, "I want to move out."

The little excitement in the restroom quickly cooled down; Xie Lanshan's eyes lowered, knowing that his mother still couldn't accept him.

Shen Liufei nodded, knowing that it was useless to force the two to reconcile. "I can look for a home."

"Also get me a housekeeper, a-Fei." Gao Zhuyin handed a bowl of fresh congee to Shen Liufei and said, "Someone's gotta look after me if I fall into an episode."

"Certainly," Shen Liufei said as he took the bowl. "I can arrange that."

Gao Zhuyin went back to pour another bowl of congee without a word.

The air in the house was heavy; Xie Lanshan was in low spirits and kept his head down, until he noticed a bowl of congee delivered to him.

He lifted his head in surprise; since Gao Zhuyin's cooking the night before, this was the first time she'd offered to fill his bowl.

"I should be visiting you as well," Shen Liufei said after noticing the signal of reconciliation. "But I may not be in the country all the time for a while."

"No worries, you keep working." Gao Zhuyin looked up, and looked into Xie Lanshan's eyes. She parted her lips, but no sounds came out; then when she tried again, she finally said, "You can come visit me when you aren't busy with cases."

Xie Lanshan was shocked and overjoyed. It took him a while before he finally mustered some words, "Th-then, why do you want to move out?"

"You think I can stay here?" Gao Zhuyin glared at him, including Shen Liufei in her sharp glance. "You two are too loud, I couldn't even sleep from all those 'ooh-ahs' and thudding from your room last night."

That was quite an accurate description. Xie Lanshan didn't think they'd made too much noise, and only now realized his own mom had heard everything they'd done. His face turned red as he shoved a spoonful of congee in his mouth, then pinched Shen Liufei's thigh beneath the table, implying it was his fault. "You blame me?" Shen Liufei said without shying away, and merely nodded his head in apology toward Gao Zhuyin. He then said to her earnestly, "...Mom."

Extra 4: Pale Flame

Southern Region

The weather in the small town in the southern region of Myanmar was always humid and hot or cold and damp. While flowers bloomed vivaciously, malaria plagued the land. The days were long here, but the sun was never harsh. The solar light shone through the clouds like a damp cotton ball floating in the sky. The southern prison, resting within the unique geographical location of the Golden Triangle, was an even more peculiar place. This was a hub filled with countless criminals involved in illegal drug trades, and as a result, the value of commodities had begun to skyrocket. Items such as toothbrushes were not only tools to clean the teeth but also a weapon for self-defense.

The twenty-three-years-old Xie Lanshan was already a familiar face in the prison, with his longest stay being six months over a violent confrontation with a disagreeable gang member. The young man had taken a wine bottle without hesitation and smashed the gang member's skull in one swift motion, which quickly earned him a ticket back into this prison. Inside his cell, Xie Lanshan was quietly sharpening a small "knife" made from a plastic comb—even a silly tool like this could save his life during a pinch. A corrections officer approached Xie Lanshan at that moment and informed him that the young man was acquitted.

This small town was two thousand kilometers away from Hanhai city, and far from his home. Xie Lanshan followed an address and arrived at an underground boxing club near the southern town. As he walked by a fancy car, he attempted to practice a fierce glare in the side mirrors. The reflection showed a handsome young face framed by sleek brush-cut hair. His gaze was clear and sharp.

Xie Lanshan was acquainted by a "friend" in prison named a-Jie, and the two supported each other like comrades in this dangerous place. Their friendship was formed during an incident in which Xie Lanshan had used his comb knife to save a-Jie from being raped by a fellow male inmate. However, the price he paid for his actions was immense. The other inmates in the same building were all on the perpetrator's side and planned to gang up on Xie Lanshan while the corrections officers weren't watching, then shoved his face into the public bedpan.

A-Jie, who was acquitted before Xie Lanshan, secretly told his savior the address of the underground boxing club as thanks for all the help while they were

incarcerated. He requested for Xie Lanshan to find him at the club upon acquittal.

Unbeknownst to everyone, Xie Lanshan was on a secret mission—a relatively common undercover mission. At that time, the national border between China and Myanmar was under constant attack by the head of the largest armed drug-dealing organization, Mu Kun. The drug lord was infamously known for his ruthlessness and cruelty across the globe. A-Jie was the nephew of Gold Tooth, one of Mu Kun's most trusted men, while Xie Lanshan's true identity was as a member of the Blue Fox team in the Hanhai City Province's Antidrug Special Forces.

Before Xie Lanshan, countless antidrug officers and armed border guards had attempted to get close to Mu Kun through disguise, but most efforts were in vain. As for those selected few who managed to make it into Mu Kun's organization, all were taken out under dire circumstances in this rugged land by a former special ops officer called the "Apostle." This mysterious ex-officer betrayed his comrades to join hands with the drug lord and was responsible for sending all the undercover cops back to China as cold corpses.

The mission was a perilous one-way ticket to death. Xie Lanshan had once asked his captain in the Blue Foxes, "Why was I your choice?"

His captain had responded, "Because you can't sit back and watch suffering before your eyes."

Xie Lanshan was later informed that his captain immediately regretted his decision as soon as Xie Lanshan accepted the mission. He'd attempted to remove the young Blue Fox from the front lines, however, the higher-ups of the provincial branch refused to approve any of these removal requests. Next, Xie Lanshan asked, "Why am I no longer your choice?"

Captain Sui Hong fixed his gaze on him for a long while before repeating the same response: "Because you can't sit back and watch suffering before your eyes."

The Boy

A bloody brawl occurred within the metal cage when Xie Lanshan stepped into the club. A rather slim boy was fighting against a well-built man under the spotlight. The boy's dexterous steps and movement were not enough to make up for the massive difference in size, making this match seem more like a one-sided assault by the bigger man. Regardless, the prize could only be redeemed after surviving a full fifteen minutes within the cage, so the already-bleeding boy stubbornly stood his ground despite the countless bruises on his face.

Xie Lanshan noticed the boy's hair color was a strange mix of red and yellow, like the feathers of a golden pheasant. The tank top he wore had been ripped to shreds by his opponent, exposing blotches of a tattoo on his body. From the seemingly nonsensical patterns on the boy, Xie Lanshan recognized a line written in Chinese: *Mama loves me.*

A-Jie greeted Xie Lanshan warmly from afar. This former inmate no longer donned the same pathetic front he had while incarcerated and seemed to have picked up his old drug-dealing business since his acquittal. He was seated at a VIP booth right by the cage, where his obnoxious gold and silver accessories glistened under the spotlight.

Fifteen minutes was as long as a lifetime. The boy in the cage was finally at his limit and crawled to the corner, crying for a reprieve behind the metal bars. He repeatedly cried in Chinese, “Help!” The audience was thrilled; screams filled the club like a chorus. Xie Lanshan’s eyebrows furrowed as he repeated Sui Hong’s words to remind himself of his mission: *Unnecessary acts of kindness can potentially expose your identity.*

The boy in the cage was severely bruised. He suddenly turned and attacked his opponent’s crotch out of survival instinct. The heavy blow between his legs caused the larger man to yelp in pain. Angered, he flexed his muscles until they bulged and stood menacingly like a volcano on the verge of eruption. Yet just then, the bell to the fifteen-minute timer rang, and the cage’s door rolled open. That didn’t stop the large man—he chased the boy out of the cell, determined to beat the poor soul into ground meat.

The boy rushed by Xie Lanshan’s feet and grabbed the young man’s pants while crying for help. Blood and spit mixed with his words as he opened his mouth; the muffled voice that came out seemed to be calling out “bro” in Chinese. Just as the muscular man stole a customer’s wine bottle and was ready to smash it over the boy’s head, Xie Lanshan instinctively stopped the man with a tight grip on his wrist.

The man was nearly two meters tall. He turned his gaze down to glare at Xie Lanshan, annoyed that a bystander had stopped him. Just as another fight was about to spark between the two men, someone from the audience suddenly cried out in Burmese, “The cops are here!”

The audience immediately dispersed like a flock of pigeons. Places like this that constantly reeked from the smell of fresh blood and violence were naturally illegal establishments, as danger and death loomed in the air.

Xie Lanshan shielded the boy and said in Chinese, “Run to the left after you get out of here.” A-Jie tugged Xie Lanshan amidst the panic, admitting that he was the one who’d called the cops to distract the crowd earlier after realizing the situation was taking a turn for the worst.

While the two men rushed out of the bar, a-Jie scolded Xie Lanshan for intervening in the business of the local gangs. Xie Lanshan suddenly stopped and turned his head.

The boy he’d saved earlier on a whim was right behind him, dragging his injured body as he slowly made his way toward Xie Lanshan.

“I have nowhere to go.” This was a small town in Myanmar filled with gangs and drug dealers, and it was rare to find someone who also spoke fluent Chinese. In addition, the young man looked quite amicable from their short exchange earlier—he

wasn't about to let go of this last ray of hope.

The boy's Mandarin had a slight Subei accent, so Xie Lanshan naturally asked, "What part of Jiangsu are you from?"

"No, I'm from the north." The boy was nervous as he met Xie Lanshan's still gaze. Even beneath the colorful bruises on his face, it wasn't difficult to tell that he was a rather handsome young lad. The boy parted his torn lips and responded to the hint of suspicion in Xie Lanshan's eyes. "Sorry, it's been a while since anyone talked to me; I almost forgot how to pronounce words in Mandarin."

Xie Lanshan didn't respond and instead continued running. A-Jie saw the boy and asked, "That kid's still following us. Should we shoo him away?"

Xie Lanshan still didn't respond and tacitly allowed the boy to follow them home.

Aside from bloodstains, the boy also reeked of a strange smell that permeated his whole body. It seemed as if he hadn't found a place to rest for a long while. Inside the bathroom, Xie Lanshan tossed a rough laundry brush to the boy.

"What's this?" The boy stared dumbly at the brush inside the wooden bathtub.

"Clean your back," Xie Lanshan said, expressionless. "You stink."

"You can use this for bathing?" the boy asked in bewilderment.

"At least it's something. We always use these to wash in jail." A-Jie tossed a T-shirt into the bathroom, then walked away with a grumble. He pinched his nose dramatically as if the boy was covered in fleas and gestured for the kid to clean himself up before leaving the bathroom.

The boy and Xie Lanshan were once again left alone inside the bathroom.

"Can you wash for me? I think I broke a bone." Almost as soon as he said that, the boy realized he must have overstepped his boundaries. An embarrassing blush appeared above his bruised face that quickly bloomed into a pink color. The boy lowered his gaze and said almost sheepishly, "Thank you... big bro."

Xie Lanshan pressed his eyebrows together and walked over without a word. He pulled the brush from the boy's hand and began scrubbing the lean back in the tub.

Rough brushes like this could easily rip through human skin with a little force. Yet even with Xie Lanshan's heavy handling, the boy seemed to be quite pleased and even began to introduce himself, "Hey, bro, my name is Bai—"

"I didn't ask for your name!" Xie Lanshan interrupted harshly in the sternest voice he could manage. "I don't care who you are!"

Silence filled the air as the boy closed his mouth. Then, after a few moments, the boy suddenly covered his face and began whimpering quietly.

He was still a boy of about thirteen or fourteen years of age. Xie Lanshan realized he had been too harsh and gently asked the boy after collecting himself, "Why are you crying?"

The boy responded through his whimper: *I miss home.*

Homesickness was a common illness in a foreign land. Xie Lanshan fell silent momentarily before agreeing, "Me too."

The boy walked out of the bathroom with a T-shirt that was too big for him. Xie Lanshan tossed a can of processed meat to him.

The boy studied the can and said with concern, "This can's already expired."

Xie Lanshan returned a soulless gaze at him. The boy perked up his lips, opened the can, and then quickly downed the meat inside. His colorful hair now pressed neatly down his face after the bath, like brushed feathers.

A-Jie, who was also eating a can of expired meat, glanced at the boy's hair and blurted out, "That hair sure is even uglier than mine."

"It's not ugly; this hairstyle makes me look like the sun." Then the boy explained earnestly, "I want to keep the sun around me because my life's always cold and wet."

The boy said his mom was beautiful and had made a living selling her body when she was young, but after bearing the son of someone she couldn't even remember, she began gaining weight and eventually lost her job. She later had no choice but to live off charity and blamed the misfortune in her life on the child she'd never asked for. Her screeching had grown louder by the day, until she could no longer walk. The young boy was fed up with his mother's constant and violent howls and finally ran out the door to wander at a young age. His journey led him to work with local gangs until he managed to become a stowaway and made his way out of his home country to the Golden Triangle.

This fourteen-year-old was slightly taller than other boys his age and looked a bit older. Despite his appearance, his ideals were silly and naïve. He claimed to have seen some American highway movies and believed protagonists with tough childhoods would find their happy ending when they mustered up their courage to seize the day.

A-Jie was already asleep after snorting off those foolish dreams. Xie Lanshan almost laughed out loud at this child's proclamation.

The boy kept staring at Xie Lanshan; his unmoving gaze captured a hint of a smile beneath the young man's dark eyes, and he felt his heart warm. Then, finally, he said earnestly to Xie Lanshan, "I realize you're not like that guy; you're a good guy."

Xie Lanshan didn't respond.

The boy added, almost enviously, "You're a good person, so your mom must also be a good person."

Mother

Xie Lanshan still remembered the last words he said to that woman: "You're not my mom."

After the death of Xie Jiaqing, Xie Lanshan's mother went mad. Xie Lanshan was still a young boy at the time, and no relatives wanted another mouth to feed, so he had

no choice but to go to an orphanage. The boy finally found a new home when Tao Jun, Xie Jiaqing's former colleague, stood up and offered to be Xie Lanshan's guardian. However, he only discovered after moving into the Tao household that the person who offered to save him from the orphanage was actually Tao Jun's wife, Yang Rui.

Old Tao was a busy and rough man who practically lived in the bureau, leaving the young Xie Lanshan to spend most of his time at home with Yang Rui.

Of course, boys like him all had a rebellious phase, even if Xie Lanshan's phase was short enough to be easily forgotten. Xie Lanshan's rebellion wasn't aggressive or hyperactive like other boys his age; he was quiet.

Yang Rui had known Xie Lanshan for a long time and quickly caught the boy's long silence. She saw a dark and icy trench inside his heart that could only be filled with more love and warmth.

Xie Lanshan found it challenging to blend into this new family and refused to eat at the same table as the Taos during holidays. Noticing his behavior, Yang Rui would bring breakfast to him every morning. Sometimes, it would be a Western breakfast consisting of milk, croissants, and fruit, while other times, it would be a traditional Chinese breakfast of youtiao, Chinese shortbread, and douhua. The young boy was an early riser and would always wait in his room after washing himself in the morning until the savory smell of food flowed from the kitchen. Yet despite Yang Rui's efforts, Xie Lanshan refused to open up to her. Aside from a courteous but distant "thank you," the boy had no intention of conversing with the woman.

As soon as classes resumed, Yang Rui bought a new shirt and backpack for Xie Lanshan. She ironed the shirt flat before delivering the new bag to the boys' room. The young Tao Longyue complained about his mom playing favorites and attempted to exchange his old clothes for Xie Lanshan's new gifts, but Yang Rui scolded her son and handed the gifts to Xie Lanshan with a warm smile.

Xie Lanshan instinctively dodged as Yang Rui's hands reached out. But the instant those warm fingers touched the back of his hand, Xie Lanshan felt an electric current zapping into his body until it spread from top to bottom; it was an almost nostalgic feeling of being at home.

The north wind banged heavily against the windows to warn of a coming storm. Yang Rui eased the anxiety in the room and said with a grin, "Your homeroom teacher thought I was your mom when I went to school today."

Xie Lanshan touched the bullet necklace around his neck and rebutted stiffly, "You're not my mom."

"I'm not, but you can think of me as one. Your teacher said you've become quieter and refused to play with other kids. She said you pushed a classmate down during sports and didn't even apologize when he stood back up with a bloody nose. She said you weren't like this before; she's worried about you."

“He fell down himself, what am I supposed to say?” Xie Lanshan returned with a cold voice. “What, was I supposed to go ‘the world has kissed my soul for its pain, so asking for its return in songs’?”

“You’ve done well already, but you’re Xie Jiaqing’s son.” Yang Rui moved closer to Xie Lanshan, comforting this boy with an aching heart. She said, “We were all born lonely, but we will eventually overcome solitude; we were all born selfish, but we will eventually overcome ourselves. The son of a hero can do so much better.”

“So what if he was a hero? My dad might have been one, but my mom’s a madwoman. They locked her inside a psych ward without ever considering that she’s the widow of a hero!” Xie Lanshan exclaimed like an erupting volcano. “I don’t have a family anymore, so stop pretending to care about me; you’re not even my mom!”

Tao Longyue couldn’t stand this bratty attitude and shouted, “Don’t talk to my mom like that! Leave this house and go live on your own, if you’re so great!”

The storm arrived as projected; the dense downpour of rain glued together the sky and land. For a moment, the world seemed to have regressed to a more primitive time. Finally, Xie Lanshan couldn’t stand these pretentious Taos and left the room in anger.

Yang Rui called Xie Lanshan but received no response. She quickly grabbed an umbrella and rushed out into the rainy night. She trudged far on her own to search for Xie Lanshan, but was robbed on the street. The thief had planned on fleeing after taking her purse, but because Yang Rui attempted to fight back as the wife of a policeman, she was stabbed over a dozen times by the mad thief in retaliation. The once kind and warm face twisted in pain, and her clothes stained with black and crimson liquid like blooming flowers. Tao Longyue dropped to his knees and cried at this horrific scene.

No one scolded Xie Lanshan. The young boy stood alone outside Yang Rui’s mourning hall. He lifted his head, suppressed the tumbling discomfort in his stomach, and gazed out behind the heavy rain toward the bright sun. He could feel his retinas burning, but he didn’t look away; this affected his vision for a long time, making him see white shadows no matter where he went, like a torch left behind by the pale sun.

Xie Lanshan didn’t shed a single tear throughout the funeral, but he could no longer overlook human struggles for the rest of his life.

Xie Lanshan had never told Sui Hong this story and recounted it to this strange young boy he had just met on this humid night in Myanmar.

A-Jie was sleeping on the bed while Xie Lanshan and the boy slept on the floor. The room was small because Xie Lanshan had promised to stay with a-Jie in this abandoned garage temporarily before their business took off. The boy fell into silence after hearing this story, then suddenly approached Xie Lanshan from behind and slowly reached out.

The two locked fingers as if they had known each other for centuries, feeling their palms’ warmth. That familiar spark of electricity once again zapped through their hands, like the day Yang Rui’s motherly touch had moved him. Xie Lanshan closed

his eyes and felt a single belated tear roll down his cheeks.

Mu Kun

Xie Lanshan's rare good night's sleep was disturbed by a-Jie's angry holler early in the morning. The boy had stolen their wallets and written a quirky note on the table: *Thanks, bro, I'll pay you back.*

A signature was left on the bottom of the note, but the sketchy and awful handwriting made it difficult to make out his name; Xie Lanshan couldn't determine if the character after Bai was Shuo or Ming.

Perhaps it's the easier one to write, Ming, Xie Lanshan thought. The character represented light and brightness, just like how the boy yearned so much for the sun's warmth.

Under a-Jie's referral, Xie Lanshan quickly made his way into the Golden Triangle's drug trade. The boss of the armed organization was a man named Mu Kun, who was often likened to an evil dragon, like in western fantasy stories—because his hobbies included murder and collecting riches. Despite the rumors, Xie Lanshan requested to be placed as close to Mu Kun as possible while providing back-end intel support to the armed forces of the Golden Triangle.

A-Jie brought over a former lackey of Mu Kun that day. The young man was on the run from Mu Kun's subordinates after stealing a batch of goods for himself during a trade and had been battered. Wounds and bloodstains were all over his clothes and he acted like a frightened bird at wit's end.

The young man offered them a large chunk of gold and promised to split half of his wealth if the two men agreed to escort him past the southern rainforest. Xie Lanshan adamantly refused, but a-Jie was lured by the promise of profit and felt it wouldn't hurt to sneak one man out this once. After a-Jie offered to pay for food and shelter, Xie Lanshan couldn't fight back and had no choice but to agree to collaborate this once.

They cleaned themselves up, then Xie Lanshan noticed the young man was quite good-looking. He had tan skin and defined features, as if he'd inherited the traits of both Southeast Asian ancestry and Western blood.

The young man was older than Xie Lanshan but was more skittish than a rat. He introduced himself as a-Kun and insisted on calling Xie Lanshan a-Lan. Like a clingy chick afraid of being left behind by its mother hen, he refused to stay even a minute away from his two escorts. Throughout the escape, the trio was met with multiple assassination attempts and bounty requests in the black market for a-Kun's head. Amidst the storm, a-Jie was demoralized and burned out by the dangerous circumstances surrounding them. As they approached their destination, he found an excuse to part from Xie Lanshan temporarily. He contacted a local drug dealer who

was offering a bounty for a-Kun's life, spilling out the exact whereabouts of where a-Kun was hiding.

But as soon as Xie Lanshan discovered the truth, he refused to turn a-Kun in and insisted on helping the poor man. It was too late for a-Jie to change his mind; the gangs had already surrounded their place of shelter, and there was nowhere for them to run. A-Kun had only two options: to be taken away or killed by the gangs. In the face of this, Xie Lanshan still decided to keep his promise; after all, they had already come this far and couldn't possibly turn around at the last minute out of convenience. A-Jie failed to convince Xie Lanshan to run and left the man to spearhead a-Kun's rescue.

A-Kun wasn't surprised or joyous when Xie Lanshan reappeared before him, nor was he expecting help to arrive. Instead, he merely stared blankly at Xie Lanshan, his hazel eyes still as if they were petrified.

Sounds of car engines were already audible inside the small house, and Xie Lanshan knew they were of the gangsters that a-Jie had called, so he quickly pulled the still dumbfounded a-Kun away and ran out the back door. After stealing a local's motorcycle, Xie Lanshan tossed a helmet to a-Kun and shouted, "What are you waiting for, get on!"

Bullets fired behind them like a rain shower. One even scratched Xie Lanshan's helmet as they fled. Xie Lanshan felt his blood and soul escape his body during this chase as he swiftly and skillfully navigated through a damp alley until they escaped the pursuers.

The suffocating feeling finally eased as Xie Lanshan slowed the bike down. He felt the young man's tight grip around his waist behind him; the humid wind traveled against their sweaty bodies at the tail end of summer.

A-Kun knew that a-Jie was the one who betrayed him, but he couldn't fathom why Xie Lanshan would come back and save him at the last minute. After a silent moment, he finally verbalized his confusion, "You could die if you keep coming back for me."

"I promised you," Xie Lanshan responded airily, "that I would bring you home."

A-Kun left without hesitation after Xie Lanshan successfully escorted him to Tachilek, but the promised gold never arrived, not that Xie Lanshan cared. He continued to hang with a-Jie in the bars the days after, hoping to get close to a small-time boss under Mu Kun. A few hard shots in, the boss was already picking a fight with someone.

It started when the boss set his eyes on an underage girl, but she refused to submit herself to the man. Amidst the pulling and shoving, another boy who claimed to be a friend of the young girl stepped in to shield her from the adult man. Xie Lanshan immediately recognized the boy was the same boxer kid who once followed him home—Bai Shuo or Bai Ming.

Mu Kun's subordinates were all hunting dogs. While the boss still had some patience for the girl, he had no reservations hurting a boy dressed like a little punk. Xie Lanshan saw the older man pull out a gun and swiftly pushed the man's hand back down, then grabbed a wine bottle on the table and smashed it right into the boy's face.

The boy also recognized Xie Lanshan and didn't move when the bottle made contact. The force of the impact was decreased due to Xie Lanshan's careful handling, so while the injury wasn't too severe, it was still quite painful.

The boss muttered, looking dark, "The bottle ain't even broken."

In response, Xie Lanshan smashed the bottle on his head.

"Piss off!" he cursed at the boy before saying to the man, "Bro, let it go already. A leader shouldn't waste time with these stupid kids. If you really want to vent your anger, I'll be more than happy to spar with you."

The boss seemed convinced by Xie Lanshan as he was carried off to the bar's exit. Yet as soon as they stepped out, the older man suddenly took the broken wine bottle on the counter and stabbed it hard into the young boy's throat.

Unable to dodge, the boy stared in shock at Xie Lanshan as he fell to the ground.

Police sirens rang out from afar, and the drug dealers quickly dispersed like a pack of rats. Only Xie Lanshan stood dumbly inside the empty bar. Then, after a few seconds, he instinctively took off his T-shirt, ripped it up, and began tending to the wounds of this boy.

The young boy clamped hard onto Xie Lanshan's hand and called out through his tears, "Mister... I'm also... I'm also Chinese. Save me..."

The aorta on the left side of the boy's neck was cut, and blood spilled out onto Xie Lanshan's face as soon as he opened his mouth.

The drug boss called out from behind, "Xie Lanshan! Do you fucking want to be caught? What are you doing?!"

Xie Lanshan didn't respond. Instead, he pulled the boy's left arm above his head and sealed the wound tightly with his clothes to stop the bleeding. Then, with all of his might, he pressed onto the boy's spine.

The bleeding didn't stop; the boy's eyes were losing focus, and his breathing was getting weaker by the second.

It wasn't until bullets whizzed past Xie Lanshan's ears that a-Jie managed to shove Xie Lanshan into the car. He didn't seem to have recognized the kid and only scolded Xie Lanshan harshly, "You fool, he's already dead!"

"I didn't know you were such a damn saint!" The boss pressed his gun against Xie Lanshan's forehead as soon as they escaped the police and sneered through his clenched teeth, "If Mu Kun didn't request to see you, I would've shot you dead by now."

Xie Lanshan remained wordless during times like this. Blood still covered his body.

“I don’t get it—why does Boss Mu want to see him?” another drug dealer in the same vehicle complained.

“He can fight—and he’s good.” Yet, the small-time boss was still a man who could look at the bigger picture. “He could hide in the rain forest for three hours without moving even if his whole body was covered in ants. Then he could turn and take on three special force cops at once; tell me, could a bastard like you do the same?”

“He can fight?” The drug dealer snorted. “More like he’s got a pretty face.”

And that was how Xie Lanshan was taken to meet Mu Kun for the first time. He had never thought that the devil who instilled fear in the hearts of everyone in the Golden Triangle was the same timid and clingy boy he had once saved: a-Kun.

No one knew that Mu Kun from the Golden Triangle was two people. The old Mu Kun had nineteen sons, with a-Kun being the youngest. However, old Mu Kun recalled his youngest son while on his deathbed and, against his other sons’ wishes, insisted on passing his seat to this young man. Dissatisfied with this decision, the other sons banded together and ordered the assassination of a-Kun behind their father’s back.

At their unexpected reunion, Mu Kun pulled out a fancy long blade with his right hand and swiftly slit the throat of a woman standing behind him.

Mu Kun’s motion was swift and clean; this man was used to handling long blades.

The woman stood less than a meter away from Xie Lanshan.

After licking off the blood on his blade, a-Kun—now Mu Kun—sheathed and gently wrapped an arm around Xie Lanshan’s waist from behind.

“I heard you tried to save someone like this yesterday. Look, isn’t that effort all a waste now?” Mu Kun’s voice was a gentle breeze in Xie Lanshan’s ears. He chuckled and said, “A-Lan, you’re the only one I trust from now on.”

Pale Flame

Xie Lanshan realized he had fallen into an ambush when he followed the girl into the alley. He was Mu Kun’s favorite and most trusted man, making him the target of everyone’s envy.

Before Xie Lanshan could escape, a shovel dropped from the sky and smashed into his skull. He forced himself to stand despite the pain and knocked down two people with his fists, but the blood rolled down his face like an endless stream. The skin torn from his head followed until it all blended into a pool of crimson. He was at his limit.

The people surrounding him were equipped with shovels and metal rods as they attacked Xie Lanshan from all sides until the man dropped to the ground.

He lay in a dark corner of the alleyway, where the stench of vomit and rotten food still lingered from the last time someone had retched on the street. He watched as one of the violent gangsters raised their metal rod and swung, smashing it into his face. He

saw a woman's face—a bright illusion in that brief moment. She looked like his birth mother but something about her was even more similar to Yang Rui. This bright face glistened like a spark of fire in the daylight as the woman gently called out to him.

Xie Lanshan felt his eyes watering, though he couldn't tell whether it was from blood or tears. Finally, at the tail end of his undercover career, he felt a sense of relief—he was finally free. Yet almost as soon as that thought arose, he thought of his captain, Sui Hong, and regretted that he couldn't continue his mission.

In the last moment of his life, as the emotions ran through his body, Xie Lanshan finally closed his eyes in defeat. The descent of the metal rod sliced through the air at an alarming speed. The pale flame under the sun vanished as he felt the world's sigh rumbling at the end of this lifetime.

About The Author

Renowned and popular webnovel author in China, graduate of Tongji University in Shanghai and a member of Shanghai's Writers Association. Famous works include *Lip and Sword*, *In the Dark*, and *Gentries of the City*. Jin Shisi Chai is known for her sharp writing, deep insight into social topics, and unique style of prose that earned her a loyal following of readers on social media. Many of her works have sold adaptation rights in China from film to webcomics.